

Chapter One

The Truth Revealed

Even in the wizarding world, lines ruled the majority of busy thoroughfares when intercontinental travel was a necessity. All over the world, wizards and witches queued up to take the next available Portkey from wherever they were to wherever they wanted to go. Australia was no exception and two women were standing in an enormously long line listening to the grumbling around them with deaf ears.

"You didn't have to wait with me," a tall, attractive young woman with long, auburn hair and hazel eyes said with a grateful smile. "I'm glad you did, but this must be terribly boring for you..."

"The institute is what's boring," a shorter, older redheaded woman said as she rolled her eyes. She smiled flirtatiously at a man who had been ogling the two women for the past few minutes, obviously reminding her that she was still very attractive.

"How can the Sydney Oceanic Institute for Magical Marine Life be boring, Aunt Ginny?" The taller one asked incredulously. "Look at all the wildlife you see each day! And the trips to Lemuria! Those were fantastic!"

"You sound more and more like your mother the more time I spend with you, Erin..." Ginny said dryly. "Spend thirteen years underwater and you'll see why I like to come topside every once in a while."

"You and Uncle Neville need to get out more," Erin said with a smile. "Will the four of you be able to make it for Dad's and my birthday?" She asked hopefully.

Ginny smiled and gave her niece a hug. "We're going to be there come rain or shine," she said reassuringly. "Besides, Mum would go spare if we didn't visit each year!"

"Gramma Molly is rather strict when it comes to family gatherings," Erin said with a laugh, "Uncles Fred and George were five minutes late and she made them clean up the garden last time!"

"That sounds like Mum, alright," Ginny laughed. "Oh! Time for you to Portkey home..." Ginny looked at the younger woman warmly and pulled her into a tight hug. "Tell your brothers and sisters that I said hi, and give your mother and father a hug from me."

"I will, you and Uncle Neville take care," Erin said quietly. "I miss you guys already."

"We'll miss you too, now get going before you miss your Portkey!" Ginny said with a laugh as she wiped a tear from her eye.

Erin waved again and turned to the customs officer. After the standard questions that he'd been spouting all day, he handed her a deflated rubber duck with her specific address attached to the charm. Erin turned to smile at her Aunt and waved once more before she felt a hook catch behind her navel and jerk her forward through a blur of sound and a whoosh of color.

Tall and beautiful were two words that described the young woman that landed in the secluded garden that was her destination, but graceful was not. She somehow tripped on her luggage and toppled to the ground with a thump. A garden gnome laughed amusedly at her predicament just before laughter seemingly echoed from the large house to which the garden belonged. The gnome scurried under a large potted plant, cackling all the way, when she tried to shoo it off with an attempt to look menacing.

Grateful that nobody but the gnome had seen her clumsy entrance, Erin got to her feet and dusted herself off gingerly. She retrieved her luggage and slowly walked to the open back door and smiled lovingly at the couple at the kitchen table.

"She'll be eighteen in two weeks!" A woman with long, bushy brown hair said as she covered her face with her hands. "I feel so old..."

"You're far from old, Love," A strikingly handsome man with raven black hair said as he rubbed her shoulders gently. "Colin will be finishing Hogwarts in two years and Eileen will need her dress robes for fifth year. Andrew is looking at a new broom for second year and we still have three years before Catherine even goes to the school,"

He rambled off as he sat beside his wife and smiled. "You're beautiful and don't let anyone tell you different!"

The woman blushed slightly and shook her head as a shy smile spread across her lips. "We've been married for seventeen years and you still compliment me like that?" She asked with a snort of laughter. "I hate to break it to you, Dear, but you've already got me! You don't have to try so hard."

"I'm not trying hard, Love," he said with a cheeky smile, "I'm just telling it like it is! You're beautiful and as wonderful as I remember!"

She laughed again as he took her hand in his then kissed the back of it. "You're insatiable!" She exclaimed with another laugh, slapping his arm playfully.

"How about we go for number six?" He asked with a mischievous grin, raising an eyebrow at her suggestively.

The woman rolled her eyes and pushed him away playfully. "Honestly, you'd think five would be enough!"

"Not another one!" Erin said with a wide smile as she opened the porch door and stepped into the kitchen.

"Erin!" Hermione cried as she shot from her chair and pulled her eldest daughter into her arms. "How long have you been back?!"

"I just got home, Mum!" Erin Potter said with a laugh, wrapping her mother in her long arms. "I see you and Dad haven't changed a bit!"

"It's only been a year, Sweets!" Harry said as he joined his wife and daughter in a family hug. "We've missed you terribly!"

"How did you two go without seeing each other for five years when you can't hold it in for one?" Erin asked as tears started dribbling down her cheeks.

"How was Australia?" Hermione asked after she and Harry led their daughter to the kitchen table in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"It was wonderful!" She replied enthusiastically as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "Aunt Ginny was a blast to spend time with!"

Harry and Hermione smiled at one another as Erin relayed everything she'd done with Ginny Longbottom, previously Weasley. "Work was exciting though," she continued with a bright twinkle in her eyes, "you wouldn't believe the number of lost civilizations they have there! The curses alone would curl Uncle Bill's hair!"

Harry laughed at the mental image, knowing full well that Bill would have been able to crack just about any curse or hex that was laid before him. He looked to Hermione, sharing a quick, silent conversation of their own as Erin rambled on about the different coral kingdoms and ancient aborigine settlements she'd visited.

"And that brings me back to my original question," Erin said pointedly. "You two didn't see each other for five years, then you had me and were married a year later... Why won't you tell me anything?" She looked to her parents in frustration as Hermione handed everyone steaming mugs of tea.

"That's all in the past, Erin," Harry said gently, placing his hand on her arm. He glanced at Hermione again but looked away when Erin pulled her arm from under his hand.

"There you two go again with the silent talking!" She growled. "I'm an adult! I can handle it!"

"I don't think we're willing to go through it again, honey," Hermione said compassionately. "To tell you the truth, those were some difficult times that I really wish never happened..."

"Mum... I know you love me and you want to protect me from whatever happened, but honestly, I'm almost eighteen!" Erin pleaded exasperatedly. "Why was it so tough? Was it Voldemort? Aunt Ginny wouldn't say anything either and it drove me mad!"

"Sweets... There's a lot there that your aunt doesn't even know," Harry said gently as he took her hand in his. He looked to Hermione once again then back to his daughter. "I promise that your mum and I

will talk about it,” Erin’s face lit up like it was Christmas in July. “BUT!” Harry said swiftly, “I won’t promise you anything more than that.”

“We’ll let you know what we’ve decided in a few days,” Hermione added as she placed her hand on top of theirs. “I, for one, want to enjoy the first few days you’re home!”

Erin sighed, defeated by the tag team of her parents once again. “You keep saying you’ll talk about it each year! When I was six, I was too young. When I was eleven, I was going to Hogwarts. Then when I finished, I got accepted as a curse breaker for Gringotts... Every year there was an excuse... I know you don’t want me to be hurt by whatever it is you’re hiding... Please let me know what happened this year?” She pleaded, giving them both the saddest puppy dog eyes she could muster.

Harry gave her a lopsided smile and shook his head. “I don’t think that look will work this time, but we will talk about it and let you know,” he said softly and kissed her cheek. “It’s not easy for either of us to remember those years, so please trust us...”

Erin rolled her eyes once again clearly upset that she didn’t get her way then closed them tightly. “Ok, Dad... I guess I can wait...”

“You know we love you...” Hermione said softly.

“We really do, and we’re not doing this to hurt you, Sweets,” Harry added.

“I know you do,” Erin said quietly, “and I love you too...”

Hermione was the first of the two to hug her, followed very closely by Harry. She hugged them back and they stayed in their tight, family embrace for a few moments before Erin pulled away.

“I’m knackered,” she said with a tired smile, “I’m just going to kip in my room for a few hours...”

“Get some sleep, honey,” Hermione said tenderly as she stood with her daughter. Harry wordlessly grabbed Erin’s luggage and the three

of them went upstairs to the room she'd stayed in for seventeen of her eighteen years of life. "Want me to call you when tea's ready?"

"That'd be great, Mum," Erin said with a hug.

"Then we can crack open the photo albums," Harry said eagerly as he set the luggage next to her chest of drawers.

"Dad, do we have to go through them every year?" Erin asked embarrassedly.

"You just let your father remember when you were his little girl..." Harry said with a twinkle in his eyes.

She hugged him tightly and whispered, "I still am, Daddy." With a kiss to his cheek, Erin closed the door to her room, leaving a man with a wide smile on his face and a loving look in his bright eyes.

"She'll always be your little girl," Erin heard her mother say from the other side of the door. She listened quietly as her parents walked back downstairs.

"What is it they're hiding?" Erin hissed to herself as she undressed and slipped into a pair of silk pajamas. "They've already told me I wasn't adopted..." She yawned sleepily then concentrated for a few moments. Erin watched her hair shorten to a manageable length before tying it up into a loose ponytail and climbed into bed.

They're going to tell me this year! She thought determinedly before she let loose another yawn and was soon fast asleep.

"Erin? Time for tea, honey," Hermione said softly as she shook her daughter awake.

Erin stretched as the room began to swim back into focus and she let out a low, contented groan. "Hmm, what time is it, Mum?"

"It's just past six," her mother replied with a caring smile. "Wash up and I'll see you downstairs..."

"Alright," Erin said with a soft smile. *It's great to be back home...* She added as her conscious mind finally reasserted itself. A few minutes in the bathroom and she was sitting at the dining room table with her parents, talking excitedly about visiting Bill Weasley in Egypt for another assignment.

"How long do you have until you leave again?" Hermione asked with a sad look in her eyes. Harry looked up from his plate with a look of interest on his face.

"There's still time, Mum," Erin replied with a smile, "I'll be leaving on the first of September so I'll be here all summer."

Hermione's spirits rose considerably at the news as they finished their meal. They spoke of what happened since their last owl and laughed at the pranks that Fred and George had pulled on Harry just a few days ago.

"Let me tell you something, I don't ever want to put on another brazier as long as I live!" He said with a red face as Hermione stifled a laugh. "I'll leave being women to you..."

Erin laughed harder than she had in the past year. She loved being home with her parents but their secret kept sneaking its way back to her thoughts.

"Give us a few days, Sweets," Harry said seriously when she'd stopped laughing and looked at them curiously. "We promised we'd talk about it..."

"How do you do that?!" Erin squeaked in irritation.

"Father's intuition?" Harry said thoughtfully. "Well, it might not exist, but I've always been able to read you, remember when you were seven..."

"Of course I do!" Erin said with a laugh. "That was the last Halloween that I tried to scare you, it was like you read my mind and knew what was going to happen!"

"You don't spend as many years with Fred and George as we have and not see things coming..." Hermione said with a grin. "Face it, your father has this strange ability to know what you're thinking..."

"You better not be using Legilimency on me, Dad!" Erin said warningly.

"You'd know if I was," Harry said with a grin. "Remember, it's all in the eye contact..."

"I'll never figure out how you do that..." Erin said in a huff.

"When you have children, you'll know how it's done," Hermione said with a smile. "Which leads me to ask: How are things going with you and Justin?"

"That guy turned out to be a total creep!" Erin said in a growl. "One minute, he's nice and sweet, the next he starts telling me all these lies..." Harry and Hermione glanced at one another at the startling news. "It was like he wanted to control me or something!" She fumed. "Can you believe he tried to tell me that Aunt Ginny was using me for my money?!"

"Well, it's good that you got out of there before things went too far," Hermione said comfortingly.

Erin glanced at her eyes and saw something there she hadn't seen before and quickly looked to Harry's as well. She nodded when she saw the same thing there. "I'm going to get dressed," she announced as she took her plate into the kitchen.

"Are you going out?" Harry asked with a hint of disappointment.

"No, Dad," she said as she rolled her eyes, "I want to get into something other than pajamas so I don't feel like a slob. Besides, didn't you want to go through the photo albums again?"

"Get dressed!" Harry said with a laugh as he set the rest of the dishes to cleaning themselves.

"I'll be right back," Erin said with a smile. His reaction was so typically her father's, always spending a few nights a month going over the same tattered, old albums.

Erin causally walked upstairs and, once in her room, quickly dressed in a pair of shorts and a T-Shirt. She looked in the mirror and smiled as her hair returned to its natural length.

"I love being a Metamorphmagus," she said as her face added the light makeup she used everyday. Just enough to accentuate but look like she wasn't wearing anything at all, which was particularly true in this case as she looked herself over in the mirror.

Erin left her room and stopped midway down the stairs when she stumbled upon a very rare occurrence in the house.

"Not yet, Harry!" Hermione said in an elevated voice. Erin had never really heard her parents argue before and her eyes went wide at what she was hearing.

"Hermione, Love," Harry said comfortingly. "Erin's going to find out when she's eighteen whether we want her to or not... We should be the ones to tell her, not the Ministry."

"I know you're right," Hermione said in her normal voice, though it sounded rather sad, "But what if she hates me? I don't think I could handle that..."

"She won't hate you, Love," he retorted almost too quietly for Erin to hear. "She's going to be down here in a few minutes, think about it... I'd rather she learn it from us..."

"And not the Ministry, I know..." Hermione said as she choked back a sob. "I don't want to lose my baby girl..."

Lose me? Erin thought incredulously. *Am I sick?* She sat on the stairs in shock, wondering what she'd just overheard. *Metamorphmagi don't have a shorter lifespan, I wasn't adopted...* Erin thought hard over the different texts she'd read, trying to piece together something that would make sense. She heard footsteps heading towards the stairs and she stood quickly, trying to make it look like she'd just started

down the staircase. Erin took a nervous step and her luck foiled her once again as she tripped over the rug and began to fall forward.

“ERIN!” Harry yelled in surprise and before she could fall even a few centimeters, Harry had apparated a few steps down and caught her mid-fall. “Are you ok, Sweets?” He asked concernedly.

“Thanks, Dad,” she said a little shaken, “I’m fine, I just forgot to use the handrail again.”

“What were you thinking about that made you forget that?” he asked nervously.

“I just wasn’t thinking,” she lied and winced when her father’s eyes told her he didn’t believe a word she’d said. “Ok, I was thinking about that secret you two have, OK?” She pulled out of his arms and took hold of the handrail as she stomped down the stairs. Erin made her way to the sitting room and slumped into the sofa, where they’d always sit when going over the family photos.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said quietly as he sat to her right. “We’re still working on that...”

“Maybe this will help, Love,” Hermione said as she handed him two books that Erin hadn’t seen before.

“Are you sure?” He asked as he took them from his wife.

“You’re right, Harry,” Hermione sighed then turned towards Erin. “I want you to know that I love you very much,” Hermione started as she took her daughter’s hand in her trembling ones, “and I hope you won’t hate me after we tell you the truth.”

“Mum, what could be so bad that I’d hate you?” Erin asked bewildered as tears began to well in hers and her mother’s eyes.

“Eighteen years ago, I took you as my own,” Hermione said with a shaky voice. Her eyes dropped from Erin’s and she concentrated on her hands instead. “Your real mother died and I carried you to term.”

"My *REAL* mother?" Erin asked in shock. Her mind began swimming with unanswered questions and she was unable to concentrate on any particular one until a specific memory surfaced. "You told me I wasn't adopted," she said evenly as her tears began to flow freely.

"Erin, you weren't adopted," Harry said as he moved to sit on the coffee table. "I am your father and your real mother died before you were born..."

Hermione's tears were building as she looked to Erin, "I'm sorry that we didn't tell you sooner," she said with a wavering voice. "Your Dad and Mum were engaged when... This is so hard to say..." Hermione looked to Harry for support and he provided it with a gentle smile.

"Erin, it will be easier this way," he said gently and turned her face to his tenderly. "Look into my eyes..."

"Dad..." She started but as soon as her gaze met his, her eyes went wide.

"*Legilimens*," Harry whispered softly and Erin's world fell away, replaced by her father's memories.

Chapter Two

A Long Overdue Visit

The cold wind buffeted the icy wet rain against his still form as deafening thunder echoed overhead. London was a much different place from this height and he watched the people and cars scuttle about like ants hurrying into their hills. The wind blasted by again, catching his woolen cloak unawares, causing it to flap noiselessly like a flag as another roar ripped through the cloud-laden heavens.

A small, sarcastic grin crept across his otherwise stony features as his eyes flicked about, peering in the darkness of the alleys below. It was just such a night that he had been unknowingly turned away by one of his best friends after he had tried to step over that forbidden line with her. She could have said yes had it not been for his other best friend's rush to beat him 'to the prize' and as a result of those actions, their friendship had deteriorated.

A new batch of thunder rolled across the sky like a boulder down an unstable hill. Harry and his partner had been perched on this selfsame rooftop for the past three months, watching for their elusive quarry. So far, their efforts were in vain. Every assignment they'd received after he'd finished training had been one married couple or another, a mockery of what he really desired but couldn't obtain through the one woman that he loved.

He shook his head ruefully before wrapping his cloak about him once again and letting out a soft laugh.

"I didn't think you'd get here in time, Tonks," he said hoarsely as if his mouth were full of cotton.

"Wotcher, Harry?" she said in her jovial tone that was saved for good friends. "Had a little accident in Moody's office and he made me clean it up."

"Aren't you one of the tops in stealth?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Sod off," she said playfully. "Any luck finding our misguided friend?"

Harry shook his head wearily. "There hasn't been anyone through that matches his description," he explained irritably. "The wards have been silent, so we haven't had anyone disguised with either Muggle or magical means. The only way he got through is if he was a Metamorphmagus like you and me."

Tonks sighed and scanned the entrance to The Leaky Cauldron as if to verify his words. "Kingsley and his men are in place, why don't we head back to the flat and get some rest?"

Harry nodded slowly; his eyes trained on everything yet nothing in particular, but didn't turn to leave.

"I wish you'd tell me what's wrong..." Tonks said quietly, watching his profile and the blank expression on his face. "Is it Ron again?"

Harry sighed. "It's nothing, let's get back," he said with a smile. He turned to leave and Tonks stepped along side him. "What should we have for tea tonight?" he asked his partner as the wind and rain intensified.

"I'm up for take away again," she yelled over the new batch of thunder that leapt from somewhere to the right and ran along the clouds until it disappeared in front of them.

"I'll be back with some Chinese then, see you in a bit," Harry said with a clap on her shoulder. Before she could say anything else, he disappeared and walked from an alley next to a Chinese restaurant.

Lost in his thoughts, he entered the establishment and ordered in an almost mechanical nature. Rice, sweet and sour this, egg-drop that, beef, pork, the lines between the dishes blurred in front of his eyes and after a few minutes, paid the cashier and was out in the storm again. Walking down the same alley, there was a pop and he was hanging his drenched cloak in the hallway of his temporary home.

Tonks relieved him of his packages and directed him to his room with an order to change into something warm and dry. Harry didn't resist and soon found himself in a pair of old sweat pants and jumper that were still two sizes too large.

"Old habits die hard, do they?" Tonks asked with a smile from the kitchen.

"You get used to the bagginess after sixteen years," Harry said with a slight grin as he lumped a bit of everything onto a plate and sat at the table.

"Hedwig dropped off a delivery for you," Tonks said quietly, pointing to a rolled parchment that hadn't caught Harry's attention yet. "I think it might be from Hermione..."

Harry fumbled with the paper cylinder and looked at the neat handwriting that was unmistakably Hermione's. He set it back on the table and returned to eating.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Tonks asked as she sat next to him.

"If it's like her last letter, she's gushing on and on about her boyfriend and how happy they are..." Harry said glumly. "No need to worsen my day, now is there?"

"When was the last time you spoke with her?" Tonks asked concernedly. "You two were always close..."

"Do we have to get into this again?" Harry asked with a frown. "She made her choice and both of them seem to be happy. She doesn't need me being moody around her."

"I'm sorry, Harry, I just... you seemed happier when you and she could talk... I miss that part of you..." Tonks laid a hand on his arm, keeping him from shoveling another forkful of food into his mouth. "Go see her, Harry."

Harry looked to his partner then the letter he'd just received. "I'll read the letter, I won't promise anything beyond that," he grumbled. With a sigh he set down his fork and opened the rolled parchment.

*Dear Harry,
It's been a while since I've last written, hasn't it? Ron's still upset that I've been trying to keep you in the loop with everything that's going on. I wish I knew what happened... I miss talking to you. Everything is*

going well at the office. I've finally managed to secure funding in the research to cure lycanthropy. I can't believe that they stopped when Fudge took office, but with Mr. Weasley as the new Minister, things have started to turn around. Ginny and Draco have broken up... again... I wish she'd see that he's not the right guy for her. Molly has set a decree that he isn't to be allowed on the property. The other day he tried to sneak in to see Gin but the garden gnomes ambushed him and threw him over the hedge, it was hilarious! Fred and George were by the flat the other day, something about Ron shirking his responsibilities as their guinea pig. Ron's been out of town with the Cannons... Harry, I feel so alone... I know I have Ron and I honestly do love him, but can you feel alone even then? I must be tired, I'm rambling here. Please come and visit, I've missed you! Ron won't be home for another few days if that's why you've stopped talking to me... Love from Hermione

Harry returned the letter to the table and rubbed his eyes.

"Anything good?" Tonks asked quietly.

"I'm going to bed, when's the next shift?"

"Oh, day after tomorrow at six," she replied softly. "Finish eating, you need to keep your strength up."

"I'll get something later, I need to lie down," Harry said with a shrug. Pushing his plate away, Harry walked into his room and slid onto the mattress with a sigh. *So, love doesn't always mean you can be happy...* he thought with a sarcastic snort. The bed sank as Tonks slid in next to him and she wrapped an arm around his midsection.

"Want to talk?" she asked quietly in his ear.

Harry rolled to his back and pulled her down into a gentle kiss. "Not right now," he whispered softly as Tonks snuggled into him. They laid in the dark for a while, listening to the rain pelt the windows and the thunder rage against the howl of the wind. Every so often a

spectacular flash of lightning would light the room they were occupying.

A good portion of that time, Harry ran his fingers through the soft, silky locks of his partner, enjoying the silence and warmth she was offering his chilled body. He looked down when she cleared her throat and smiled at her pig-snout of a nose.

“Well, at least you haven’t lost your sense of humor,” she said with a grin.

Harry chuckled and quickly kissed her comedic nose before settling back in his pillows. “Why now?” he whispered to the ceiling.

“Why what?” she asked inquisitively, scooting a little closer to him and propping her chin on her folded arms.

Harry sighed and slid his hand down her back then back to the nape of her neck, eliciting a shiver from the woman resting on his chest. “They’ve been dating for the past five years and now she tells me she’s lonely... Isn’t Ron enough? That was made crystal clear to me before we finished school...”

“You three were always together then, weren’t you?” she stated more than asked. “I was surprised when you didn’t leave the Dursleys’ before your last year at Hogwarts.”

“Ron made it perfectly clear he didn’t want me around him and his new girlfriend,” Harry said a little too harshly. “Sorry, that jealousy bit still gets to me. You’d think he’d know I wouldn’t try and break them up, but he changed...”

“I don’t know what happened, you two seemed to be the best of friends...”

“I don’t know either,” Harry said with another sigh. He looked to Tonks’ hazel eyes and wrapped his other arm around her.

“Are you going to see her tomorrow?” she asked, readjusting so she was on top of him.

Harry shrugged as he slid his hands up her side and parted her robe, revealing her milky, white skin. "I don't know," he said quietly as she leaned towards him. There were no further words spoken as the rest of their clothes were discarded and the storm raged outside.

Harry's eyes fluttered open to the bright sunlight streaming through the tall, gothic windows in his room. The light struck him squarely in the face and he blinked away the intrusive rays.

"What time is it?" Tonks mumbled from his chest.

Harry fumbled with his glasses and glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. "Half past six," he said slowly. "The sun doesn't have the right to be up so early." He waved his hand at the curtains and the heavy drapes shielded the two from the sneering sun outside. "If Moody or Shackbolt found out about this, we'd certainly be in the frying pan..." he mumbled as he slumped back into his pillows.

"We've been together for three years, Harry," she said with a sigh. "I know you're worried about losing our jobs, but they haven't found out or they're not saying anything. I'd think Moody would be fine with it, he knows what happened during the war... besides, they *haven't* said anything and we're not hurting anyone," she said sullenly from his chest. "At least I don't think I hurt anything last night..." Tonks added with a sly grin.

Harry laughed softly. "No, I don't think you did..." Unable to fall asleep again, he rolled into Tonks and wrapped an arm around her.

"I'm too tired, Harry," she said with a soft laugh.

"Mmm, not to worry, just trying to figure out if I want to eat, shower, or get out of the flat for once..."

"If you go through the front door, don't forget your disguise and the ring this time... that old lady across the hall thought I was cheating on my faithful husband!"

Harry chuckled. "I won't forget. I think it'll be eat then shower," he said with a smile. With his mind made up, he slipped out of bed, dressed in his bathrobe then shuffled into the kitchen. Filling a plate with close

to the same concoction he had the night before, Harry seated himself at the table and began his breakfast. He heard the shower start and glanced at the letter that Hedwig delivered the previous night.

With a sigh, he grabbed a fresh piece of parchment and scribbled a reply.

*Hermione,
Sorry I didn't reply straight away. I can be by today, whenever you'd
like is fine with me, just send Hedwig back with a time.
Talk to you then,
Harry*

He rolled the parchment and tied it to the waiting Hedwig's leg. "Keep an eye out for Pig, ok? I don't want to set Ron off," Harry said with a slightly saddened expression on his face.

Hedwig hooted a reply and affectionately nipped Harry's finger before taking flight into the morning air. Harry glanced over his shoulder at the woman snaking her arms around him and stole a quick kiss.

"A letter to Hermione?" she asked with a smile.

Harry nodded and watched as Hedwig disappeared from view. "I'm going to visit her today..."

"That's good, Harry," Tonks said as she rubbed his back. "It's been too long since the two of you had a proper chat."

Harry nodded absently and sat at their small kitchen table to finish his breakfast. Tonks sat across from him, nursing a cup of piping hot tea, each of them enjoying the silence.

Shortly thereafter, Harry was showered and dressed for the day. It felt like the Chinese he had eaten for breakfast was causing his stomach to flip-flop from nervous to nauseous in rapid succession. He'd changed his mind about visiting Hermione several times; should he go, should he stay, should he go somewhere else? Harry had been away from the two of them for so long, it felt as if he didn't know who they were anymore. Ron he knew the least of the two and Harry couldn't understand just what happened to his former best friend.

The flapping of Hedwig's wings and the hoot of her arrival pulled his mind from the meanderings of his past. He smiled at his feathered friend and untied the note from her leg. With an owl treat and a stroke of her head, Hedwig flew to her perch above the cooler and settled in for a mid-morning nap. Harry opened the latest correspondence and quickly scanned Hermione's tidy scrawl.

<i>Dear</i>	<i>Harry,</i>
<i>I'm so happy you've decided to visit this time! It's been ages!</i>	
<i>Whenever you want to stop by is fine with me, if you can make it for lunch I'll see what I can whip up! Thank you for coming over, I've missed</i>	<i>you!</i>
<i>Love</i>	<i>from</i>
<i>Hermione</i>	

Harry looked at the letter once again before sighing and setting it on the table next to the one he'd received the previous night.

Well, here goes nothing... he grumbled to himself.

"Hey, I'll be at Hermione's if anything comes up," he said with a quick wave.

"Have your ring on, *Dear?*" Tonks asked with a grin. Harry raised his hand and smiled sarcastically in reply before giving himself brown hair, blue eyes, and adding a few pounds to his midsection. His scar disappeared and he smiled briefly at the results. "There's the man I married," Tonks said with a laugh. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do..."

"Funny, Tonks," Harry said with a fading grin then stepped into the hall.

"Oh, Mister Smith, lovely day isn't it?" An elderly lady said from her door.

"So nice that I thought I'd go for a walk, Mrs. Robinson," he returned with a smile, closing the door before she could peek in to the flat. "I think your dog Scruffles would love a day in the park, you should get out and enjoy the wonderful weather as well."

She laughed and waved as he walked down the hall shaking his head. *That lady is too nosy for her own good...*

A few blocks from his building, Harry turned into an alley and with a pop found himself surrounded by roses and various herbs. Not many people would consider this garden out of the ordinary, if they didn't know the various uses the plants provided for the inhabitants of the small cottage he was visiting. He straightened his jumper self-consciously and walked up the path to the back door. It opened as he was climbing the stairs and Harry looked up to see a smiling Hermione Granger in the doorway.

He tried to hide his surprise at seeing how she'd changed in five years. Her hair was the same, bushy brown that it had always been, only shoulder-length instead of reaching to the middle of her back as he remembered. She had put on weight and though she was still beautiful in his eyes, Hermione barely looked like herself. *What happened?* he thought desperately as he smiled back at her.

"Harry! I've missed you so much!" she crooned as he crossed into the kitchen. She hugged him nervously and stepped back before he had a chance to return the greeting. "I'm glad you came before lunch! It's not much, just bangers and mash..."

"That's fine, Hermione," he said with a soft smile. "H-how have you been?"

Her smile fell a little as her eyes scanned him and her gaze stopped on his hand. "Who's the lucky woman?" she asked tentatively, flicking her brown eyes back to his face and forcing her smile to return.

"What?" He glanced at his hand and laughed. "Tonks, actually," he said as he pulled the ring off his hand.

"Tonks?" Hermione didn't hide her surprise at his news. "W-when... Why are you taking it off?"

Harry smiled as he pocketed the ring. "We're undercover as a married couple," he explained quickly. "We're not really married."

The kettle let out a piercing whistle as relief flashed on Hermione's face. "Tea's ready, why don't you have a seat, I'll be right in."

Subconsciously, Harry began scanning the walls, looking at various objects here and there. The house was impeccably clean, as he thought Hermione would keep it, and he stopped at a bookshelf full of photographs. There were some of the Weasleys, several of Ron and Hermione, and quite a few of Ron posing for team photographs. No indication of Harry being their friend could be spotted and surprisingly, there weren't any books on the shelves.

The furniture looked very comfortable and Harry could see Hermione lying on the sofa reading one of her books while the fireplace was going. But the lack of books in the room disturbed him somewhat as he scanned the other walls, examining the photographs he found. In several of them, he noticed Hermione's fake smile was firmly in place and he could see the progression to her current physical state.

"Here we are," she said cheerfully as she set a silver tray with tea accouterments on the small coffee table. There were a few Quidditch magazines lying on the polished oak top near an overstuffed chair that looked quite worn. The sofa, on the other hand, seemed to be brand new. "Do you still take it with three sugars and milk?" Hermione asked as she gracefully poured his tea.

"You still remember that?" he asked with a smile.

"Of course, Harry, how much time did we spend together in school?" she chided him playfully.

A small clock on the mantle signaled that it was now eleven forty-five and Hermione looked up with a worried look on her face.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked concernedly as he glanced at the clock.

"Ron's going to call in soon," she explained matter-of-factly. "Would you mind if we went into the kitchen?"

Harry shook his head. "Not at all..." *It looks like Ron still doesn't want me around...* he added glumly, but smiled and helped her with the tray. "Sorry I didn't get here sooner."

"That's ok, Harry, Ron calls in every three hours or so," she explained as they sat at the table. "I should wait for him in the sitting room, do you mind?"

Harry smiled softly and shook his head. "Go ahead, I can wait."

She smiled apologetically, slid a sausage on a plate and rushed into the sitting room. Harry sat miserably at the table, casually looking around the kitchen. There was gourmet cookware hanging above an island cooking station, a large cooler that looked like it belonged in a restaurant instead of a small cottage, and a bookshelf full of cookbooks. *At least she's got some books here...* he thought ruefully as he admired the surgically clean room.

There was a whoosh and a familiar, yet grating voice echoed from the other room. Harry quietly moved to the doorway to hear what was being said more clearly.

"Hey, how's your day going, Love?" Ron asked happily.

"Same as always, just made some lunch and thought you'd like a taste," she said with a forced laugh that hadn't slipped from Harry's attention. Ron said something but Harry couldn't make out the words.

Hermione must have fed him that banger.

"So," Ron said after a few minutes of huffing and puffing to cool down the sausage, "have you gone anywhere while I'm out and about?"

"I went to the office yesterday to do some extra research and stopped by the market this morning," Hermione relayed automatically. "I was thinking about going shopping this afternoon for some new robes..."

"Hermione, you know we can't afford a lot of new things right now," Ron said stiffly.

"My robes are a bit tight, Ron," Hermione protested. "Just one new set... or I could go to the secondhand store?"

Secondhand store?

"There, you can buy four times as many robes from there than at Madam Malkin's," Ron said cheerfully. "We need to watch our spending, Love."

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione said with fake cheerfulness that also failed to escape Harry's perked ears.

"It's alright, Love," Ron replied. "Well, I'll floo you at two! I love you!"

"You too, Ron," Hermione said sweetly. "See you then!"

There was another whoosh and Harry quietly moved back to his seat.

"Sorry that took so long," Hermione apologized as she walked back into the kitchen with the empty plate.

"That's fine," Harry said with a smile. "How often does he Floo in?"

"Oh, five or six times a day when he's on tour with the team," she replied nonchalantly. "He worries that I get lonely."

"Something I was going to ask," Harry said after a long pull from his cup. "Where are all your books? I noticed that your bookshelves are rather bare."

"Oh, that? Ron and I decided that they belonged in my office or in storage when I ran out of room there. Honestly, there wouldn't have been enough room for anything else if I'd brought them all here!"

"You did have quite a collection," Harry admitted with a smile. "What do you read when you're home?"

"Oh, I don't have much time to read unless I'm at the office," she said with a wistful smile. "I've got to keep the house clean and cook. Ron would burn the place down if he got too close to the stove and he's too busy with practice most of the time."

"You mentioned in your letter that you're lonely, Hermione, is everything ok?" Harry straightened himself and leaned towards her, noticing a slight smile as he did so.

“Well, I-I was rambling at that point... With work and the house, I don't have much time for a social life. Ron and I go out when he's home, but I don't have much time for friends these days.”

Harry watched as she spoke, listening carefully to her words and nodded. “What about Ginny?” he asked quietly. “You two were great friends... don't you spend time with her?”

“I used to, but Ron disowned her when she started dating Malfoy,” she sighed. “I don't know what she sees in him besides his looks and bad-boy reputation.”

“Ron disowned Ginny?” he asked incredulously.

Hermione nodded. “He went into a tirade the day he found out and the next thing I knew, she was forbidden to come to the house,” she sighed again. “We have lunch once in a while when I'm at work, but I don't get to see her all that often.”

“There's nobody else for you to spend time with?” Harry sat back in confusion when Hermione shook her head.

“Not enough time,” she said with an apologetic smile. “Oh, I did promise lunch, didn't I?” She stood suddenly and rushed to the cupboards and drawers, pulling out plates and silverware. Before Harry had a chance to say anything, she had plated the food and presented it to him. “I hope that it's good enough,” she said with a shy smile. “I only get to cook for Ron and myself and he'll eat just about anything.”

“I'm sure it's fine,” Harry said with a smile. He looked at his plate and grinned despite himself.

“Is it ok?” She asked quietly.

“It's fine, Hermione,” Harry said as he took a bite of mash. His taste buds danced in delight as the savory potatoes nearly dissolved on contact. “This is really good,” he said with a smile. “I didn't know that you cooked this well!”

Hermione blushed at the compliment and fiddled with her food. "I've had a lot of practice and I went to a Muggle university for a few classes," she admitted shyly. A dreamy look entered her eyes as she swirled her potatoes around the plate with her fork. "It made me realize how much I missed school."

"Didn't McGonagall offer you a teaching position at one point?" He asked as he enjoyed a bite of sausage.

"She did, but Ron was able to talk to his dad and got me the research position in the Ministry," she said with a slight smile. "It was enough to help us get the house and keep the bills at bay."

Harry nodded and raised his eyebrows as an idea sprang to mind. "Hey, I need to stop by Eeylops for Hedwig, would you like to go with?"

"Oh, I can't today, Harry," she said nervously. "Ron will be home in a few days and I've got to make sure things are ready for him when he gets here."

"Oh, ok," Harry said quietly. He looked at the clock above the sink and frowned. "It's almost two," he announced as he brought his empty plate to the sink and began rinsing it off. "I should go so you can talk with Ron."

"Do you have to, Harry?" she asked in an almost pleading manner. "It won't take long, maybe you could stay for tea?"

Harry turned to her and smiled reassuringly. "I guess I can stay for tea, let me check in with Tonks," he said, reaching into his pocket from where he pulled a small crystal. As he brought it to his mouth, Hermione stopped him.

"Could you take it to the garden?" She asked apologetically. "The wards around the house are sensitive to magic communication," she explained.

"Oh, sure, Hermione," he said with a slight frown. "I'll be back in a few minutes?" He couldn't help but smile when she replied with a dazzling

smile of her own. She looked at the clock and smiled again before rushing into the sitting room to wait for Ron's call.

Harry scanned the trees and shrubberies in the garden before stepping outside. The last thing he wanted to do was run into Pigwidgeon and the small bird send word to Ron that he was visiting the house. There wasn't a sign of the over-excited miniature owl and with a sigh of frustration he walked to the farthest corner of the garden.

"Tonks, are you there?" he whispered into the crystal.

A few seconds later, her voice echoed back. "Wotcher, Harry?" she asked cheerfully. "Enjoying your visit?"

"Actually, things aren't all that good," he whispered back. "Hermione's changed, a lot."

"It's been five years since you've seen her, Harry," Tonks retorted. "Of course she's changed."

"This isn't normal, Tonks," he explained. "She doesn't read anymore and seems to be subservient to Ron, really subservient to him."

"You're kidding me, right?" she asked incredulously. "This is the same girl that stood up to the both of you when you were angry?"

"The same one," Harry responded sadly. "She seems to be desperate for company too. I don't know what's happened..."

"But you're going to find out, eh?" she said with a laugh.

"I'm going to try," Harry said adamantly. "But I don't want to hurt her..."

"I know you don't, Harry," Tonks said sympathetically. "And we haven't had any leads yet. We've been assigned to Hogsmeade next week so we've only got two more nights over by the Cauldron."

"Any cover for that?" Harry asked quickly as he saw Hermione's shadow crossing the window.

"Same thing, married couple, though this time we're ourselves and not a newlywed Muggle couple," she said with relief.

"That'll be interesting," Harry said with a slight laugh. "Skeeter's going to have a field day with that."

"Argh! I forgot about that!" she cursed. "Listen I'll talk to the uppers and see about getting us a cover for that too, wouldn't do well for Harry Potter to suddenly show up with an Auror wife..."

Harry laughed. "I don't think there'd be a dark witch or wizard for kilometers. Hey, could you stop by Eeylops and pick up a new batch of owl treats for Hedwig? I'm having tea here too."

"Sure thing, Harry, you be good over there!" Tonks laughed jokingly as Harry smiled and switched off the device. He turned to see Hermione smiling from the doorstep and he grinned in return.

"Tonks is going to take care of my errand so I can stay as late as you'd like," he said as he walked up the steps, "if that's ok with you."

"Really?" she asked with a smile and pulled him into the house by his arm. "You don't know how much I appreciate your visit, Harry."

"I'm sorry I haven't been by more often," he said apologetically.

"I was wondering what happened," she said quietly. "I was surprised when you didn't want to leave the Dursleys' before seventh year..."

Harry smiled apologetically. "I thought it best I stay in the protective wards that summer..." he lied. "Better to keep me hidden at that time instead of roaming around the Burrow."

Hermione looked at him skeptically and frowned. "It was Ron, wasn't it?"

Harry shook his head and laughed quietly. "You could always see through me, couldn't you?"

"I could, and you avoided the question, Harry."

"Yes, it was Ron," Harry admitted quietly. "I didn't want to get in the way."

"There you go again," she said accusingly.

Harry sighed and slumped into a chair. "Ok, that was partly true," Harry admitted. "I-I got a letter from Ron asking me to stay away. He didn't give me a reason other than wanting to spend the summer alone with you."

"He *WHAT?*" She looked at him in shock and sat in the chair across from him. "He couldn't have told you that," she whispered.

"He did, Hermione," Harry said firmly but softened immediately and looked to the table. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have raised my voice."

"He told me that you were ill and decided to stay at Privet Drive..." She looked at her long lost friend and put a hand on his arm. "I-I didn't know, Harry, I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize," he said with a smile. He set his hand on hers and squeezed it gently. "He was probably afraid that I'd break the two of you up."

"He should have known better than that!" Hermione said angrily. "Is that what happened between you two?"

Harry shook his head. "No, not entirely," he admitted quietly. "He changed in school too and things went downhill from there. I'm not sure what really happened, but I... I don't know."

"We were always together," Hermione said sadly. "Was it something I did to drive you away from us that year?"

Harry looked up quickly and his breath caught in his throat at the look in her eyes. Despair, sadness, and loneliness were settled firmly in those deep brown pools that he'd lost himself in time and again. "Never," he said in a reassuring and definitive way. "It was never your fault!" Hermione looked down at the table and nodded, in a half-believing way. Harry turned towards her and took her hands in his. "Listen to me, Hermione, the day we became friends was the best

thing that ever happened in my life. It tore me apart to watch you... and Ron... distance yourselves from me."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Harry released her hands and looked at the table.

"Was it Ron again?" she asked softly.

Harry nodded but didn't look up. "I didn't want to be the cause of any friction between you two," he admitted quietly. Hermione nodded and he looked up to her. "Can I ask you a question?"

She nodded slowly and returned his gaze.

"Why are you forcing your smiles in most of the pictures in your sitting room?" The question was asked so quietly that she had to stop and think a few moments before she understood what he was asking.

"I am?" she asked rhetorically.

Harry nodded. "If it was the only thing I knew about you, I know when you're forcing your smiles and forcing cheerfulness," he said. "Is everything ok with you and Ron? You're not yourself, Hermione."

A flicker of rage crossed her eyes as he announced what he'd seen and she seemed to visibly close herself off. "Everything is fine between us, Harry," she said in a business-like fashion. "I'm just as I was when we went to Hogwarts," she said again and he could feel her anger building.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry said in a calming fashion. "I didn't mean to make you angry."

"I'm *NOT* angry, Harry," she hissed at him and stood quickly.

"Ok," he said under his breath and stood as well. "Hey, I seem to have messed things up a little too much," he said with a slight smile. "I think it would be best if I just head on back to the flat."

Hermione glanced at him angrily for a second, stopping her pacing mid-stride when her eyes softened. "Wait, no, I'm sorry, Harry, please don't go."

"No, I think it's best that I let you calm down," he said softly. "I had a feeling that it wouldn't be easy coming back and it looks like I was right."

Hermione stepped closer to him and set a hand on his arm. "No, I'm sorry, Harry, Ron and I love each other and it's difficult sometimes when others don't see that..."

Harry shook his head. "I know you didn't mean to get angry," he said softly as he reached for her hand. "Maybe we can get together again after we've had some time to cool down a little." Hermione hung her head and nodded. "Hedwig knows when you want to write, so write when you can, ok?"

"I will, Harry," she said softly. Harry pulled her into a tight hug and felt her stiffen so he released her quickly.

"Take care, Hermione, I'm just an owl away," Harry left through the kitchen door and disappeared straight to the flat he shared with Tonks.

Chapter Three

A New Life

"How'd tea go?" Tonks called from the kitchen. "That was rather quick... Did you even eat?"

"No, things got too awkward," Harry admitted as he walked into the room. "I asked her what happened and said she wasn't like herself," Harry grumbled as he ran his fingers through his hair and slumped into a chair at the kitchen table. "It turns out that Ron lied to her about why I didn't join them that summer. He said I was ill and didn't want to go."

"I remember something like that," Tonks admitted. "She wanted to visit you but Ron reminded her about the Dursleys and how they hated your friends so she stayed back." She stepped behind him and hugged him around the shoulders. "Hermione wasn't happy until they left for the Express, but you had already left via portkey at that point."

Harry shrugged. "We couldn't risk it with the increased Death Eater attacks."

"I know, Harry," she whispered and kissed his cheek.

"I'm going to take a nap," he said after a moment. "Today was a bit draining."

"Want me to join you?" she whispered with a nibble on his ear.

"If you want," he said with a slight smile. Harry turned and kissed her tenderly before he went to the bedroom and stripped to his boxers. He slid into bed and stared out the window wondering what had happened to the Hermione Granger he'd grown to love. A few moments later, he felt Tonks slip her arm around him and snuggle into his back.

"Why didn't you tell her how you felt?" Tonks asked as she kissed his shoulder. "I mean, before..."

"I didn't make it in time," Harry said with a sigh. "I planned to give her a break from studying with something to eat and tell her then, but Ron

somehow told her just before I did.” He rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling. “She was so happy that I didn’t have the heart to tell her. Needless to say, Ron would have gotten angry and who could say she wouldn’t have stuck by his side?”

Tonks kissed his cheek and slid in closer as he explained what happened. She settled her head on his chest and nodded for him to continue.

“When Ron owed me telling me to stay away from the Burrow, I figured that was the end of our friendship. At school he was cold towards me and was always coming between Hermione and me. She became more distant, though we talked from time to time, it just seemed like she didn’t want to be around me that often.”

“I thought for sure that you and she were meant for each other,” Tonks said casually. “You two seemed to be on a completely different wavelength than she ever was with Ron...”

“Do you know what’s funny? I can still read her,” Harry said with a sarcastic snort. “And she can still read me... Things fell apart when I asked her why she was forcing her smiles and happiness... Oh, did that make her angry.”

“She probably felt you were saying she didn’t love Ron...”

“In a way, Ron makes me think of that one guy you dated...”

“Peter?”

“No, the controlling one,” Harry corrected with a shake of his head.

“Oh, Adam,” Tonks said with a roll of her eyes. “He started laying down the lies... When I found out; he got what was coming to him.”

“I wonder how many more lies Ron’s been telling her...” Harry thought aloud. “I overheard one of their conversations today, he Floos her several times a day... she wanted to buy new robes but he said they didn’t have enough money, yet he has enough to keep in touch with her?”

"Floo powder is pretty expensive," Tonks said with a yawn.

"That's what I'm thinking too," Harry said quietly. "Tonks, you should have seen her, I mean she's still beautiful, but she's put on weight. And no, I didn't point that out to her. I have more tact than that," he added with a grin. Tonks playfully slapped his chest. "She used to be more active and when it comes to what Ron wants, she's so subservient... and that's just not like her."

"She's not going to see it that way, at least if she's bought his lies," Tonks said sleepily from his chest. "Love or thinking you're in love can blind you to certain things."

Harry kissed her forehead and hugged her gently. "I see someone else needs a nap as well..."

"More than a nap," she mumbled. "I'm bloody ready to pass out."

"Get some sleep then," he whispered quietly. "I'll be there in a minute as well." He punctuated the comment with a yawn of his own and within a matter of minutes they were both sound asleep.

The morning started as early as it had the day before and Harry Potter found himself cursing at the unforgiving light that was streaming through the open curtains. He rolled over with a groan and covered his face with a pillow. "Is it me or did the sun rise earlier than it should have today?"

"Well, now that you're awake, you may as well get ready for our shift," Tonks said from the doorway. Harry squinted to see a blurry Tonks wrapped in a white blur. "I saved some hot water for you."

With a stretch and a yawn, Harry pulled himself out of bed and shuffled sleepily to the bathroom. One invigorating shower later, he was dressed and wolfing down the food of the morning. "What is this again?"

"Leftovers from last night," Tonks deadpanned. "We won't need to go to the market until we move to Hogsmeade and Moody sent our new identities this morning so they should be here before we leave."

"Did you use Hedwig?" Harry asked, noticing the snowy owl wasn't resting over the cooler.

"No, she was gone when I got up," Tonks said with a yawn, joining him at the small table. "Maybe she's picking something up?"

Harry nodded. "If anything, she'd be at Hermione's. It's been that way for quite some time, actually. I remember when she was in France with her parents and Hedwig showed up when she wanted to send me a present for my birthday."

"That's one smart owl you have there," Tonks said with a grin.

"She is, isn't she?" he said with a slight laugh. "Hagrid helped me pick her out when I first found out about the wizarding world. Oh, and thanks for picking up the treats, she gets rather moody if she doesn't have any."

"Speak of the devil," Tonks laughed as Hedwig swooped into the room and landed gracefully on the table. She looked indignantly at the laughing female before offering the letter on her leg to Harry.

"It's nothing bad, Hedwig," Harry said with a smile and offering her a treat. "We were just discussing how intelligent you are."

If owls could smile, Hedwig would have beamed at Harry's explanation. She nipped Harry ever so gently on his finger and fluttered to her usual perch to finish off her treat.

Harry turned the letter over in his hands, noticing the tidy handwriting that Hermione had grown into and with a slight sigh, opened it.

Dear Harry,
We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot, haven't we? I was hoping that things would have worked out better than what they had but I had to go and mess everything up, didn't I? I'm sorry that I got angry with you but it felt like you were telling me that Ron and I weren't meant to be together. Harry, he loves me so much, he really does! I just wish that we were all together again... I miss your company, even if we were just sitting in the common room and you two were playing wizard's chess. When we found you bleeding to

death in the forbidden forest after your fight with Voldemort, I thought I'd lost you forever! It almost ended my relationship with Ron when I sat by your side until you woke up. We patched things up after that but the thought of losing you broke my heart. I hope we can sort out our differences and be able to see each other more often... the time we spent together yesterday felt great, even if it was only for a few hours.

I'm sorry that I've put my foot in my mouth and I hope you reconsider coming over more often. Can you forgive me?

*Love
Hermione*

Harry stared in disbelief at what he'd just read then reread it just to be sure he hadn't made a mistake.

"Is something wrong?" Tonks asked concernedly as she scooted next to him.

"Hermione just apologized for messing everything up yesterday," Harry said to his partner and handed her the letter which she read quickly. "She made it sound as if..."

"She was in love with you..." Tonks finished. "I remember the fights she and Ron had when she refused to leave you alone. He was livid."

Harry sighed and rested his face in his hands. "I can't believe it was his jealousy that pushed them away. *HIS BLOODY JEALOUSY!*" Harry slammed his fists on the table causing both Tonks and Hedwig to jump.

"Calm down, Harry," she said soothingly. "Listen, why don't we take care of our shift and then we'll see what we can do about this when we're done?"

Harry clenched his fists slowly and closed his eyes. After a few deep breaths he looked at Tonks and smiled apologetically. "Sorry about that. It seems Ron and I need to have a heart-to-heart chat sometime in the future."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said warningly. "With you angry at him and Ron being protective of Hermione, things could get ugly quick."

Harry grimaced and nodded his acquiescence. "Maybe I'll do a bit of checking around first, talk to her parents and Mrs. Weasley. That is, if he hasn't spread his lies to them as well."

"That's a bit better, you haven't seen them in a while, and perhaps it'll be a good idea to visit everyone again, for them and for you," Tonks said with a kiss to his cheek.

Harry returned the kiss and stood from his chair. "Let's get this shift over with. We'll probably have to move in the next week," he said after concentrating for a moment. When he opened his eyes, he was looking at his lovely wife, Mrs. Smith and she at her husband. They donned their rings and left for the day in Muggle fashion.

Taking their positions on the rooftops surrounding the Leaky Cauldron, they kept their lookout for the person they were tracking. Four months of surveillance had proven futile in their efforts and Kingsley arrived shortly before their shift ended.

"Any luck?" The baritone voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt rang out as he approached.

"Not a peep," Harry said in frustration. "The wards are up, I can see them, but no disguises detected. Everyone else has been regulars."

"Diggle was in and out a few times, Crockford, several other witches, wizards and hags, but nobody that fits his description," Tonks added, not turning from the entrance below.

"We have agents in and around Gringotts now," Kingsley said quietly. "You'll need to move to your house in Hogsmeade by the end of the week, and here are your new identities," he said, handing them both dossiers containing the proper Muggle and wizard documents which looked to be another married couple in their early twenties. "Have these memorized as per standard procedure and we expect you to be in place within two weeks. Standard cover, no need for stakeouts

unless you're in the Hogshead or the Three Broomsticks. As far as anyone knows, you're a happily married couple."

Harry and Tonks nodded their understanding and packed their new orders and lives in their robes. "We'll finish up here and start the move tomorrow," Harry said after returning to his surveillance.

"This assignment is over, Potter," Kinsley said in a way that made it final. "Follow your new orders, they take effect immediately."

Harry nodded and with a final look over his shoulder, he and Tonks started on their way to their flat. They were climbing down the fire escape when the storm from the other night seemed to return in full force and they doubled their efforts to get to the alley below.

"Tonks, the steps are wet, slow down," Harry said cautiously as he looked up to find her quickly gaining on him.

"I don't want to be on this bloody thing when the lightning starts, Harry," she said nervously just before everything slid into slow motion.

Harry looked up just in time to see her cloak wrap around her foot. He reached to catch her but she somehow, in Tonks' seemingly unique clumsiness, fell away from the slippery ladder. Harry reached for her hand but the rain made it slick and she slipped from his grasp. With a sickening thud, she landed in a pile of garbage at the base of the building.

Harry slid down the remaining length of ladder as quickly as he could and checked on his partner. "Tonks, are you alright?!" He checked her pulse and breathing, which were fine, but she'd been knocked unconscious and her leg was sticking out at an awkward angle. He grimaced as he gently took her calf and thigh in hand. "This is going to hurt..." he whispered and set the bone gingerly. Luckily, she was unconscious and didn't cry out in pain. With a wave of his wand, he produced a splint and checked her over for further injury, of which he found no trace besides a possible concussion. With a grunt, he picked her up and apparated to St. Mungo's.

"What happened?" a passing mediwitch asked as Harry set Tonks down on a gurney.

"She fell from a wet ladder, possible concussion and a broken leg," Harry explained as he finished laying his partner on the mobile bed. "Her name is Nymphadora Tonks, but she goes by Tonks exclusively."

"Ah, Miss Tonks... I've heard of her," the mediwitch said with a slight smile. "If you'll fill out the necessary forms at the front desk, we'll get her fixed up."

Harry smiled his appreciation and stood in line, which was thankfully short. After a brief explanation of the situation and several signed forms later he took a seat in the waiting area until called.

To pass the time, he watched people come and go. Little children who'd swallowed things they shouldn't have, an old wizard suffering from a Blast-Ended Skrewt attack, and a few other emergencies from around London made their appearances in staggered intervals. He looked up and smiled as an old school friend walked up.

"Harry Potter! I haven't seen you in ages!" she said with a smile, stopping in front of him. "How've you been?"

Harry stood and gave her a quick, friendly hug before stepping back and looking her over. "I never thought you'd go into the healer business," he said with a grin.

"You, on the other hand, screamed Auror," she said with a laugh. "Though I guess you were groomed into that, weren't you?"

"I guess," he said with a shrug. "It keeps the Death Eaters from attacking anybody else at least."

"So, are you here to pick up Hermione?" she asked with a smile. "You three were inseparable in school."

"Hermione's here?" he asked quietly. "What happened, Susan?"

Susan Bones looked at him for a moment in confusion then smiled slightly. "She meant it when she said nobody was going to come then?"

“What room is she in?” Harry asked concernedly. “Was it something bad?”

Susan shook her head. “She’ll be fine, some stomach problems that her prescribed potions will take care of if she keeps up with them,” she explained as she examined the chart she was carrying and nodded. “Hermione’s in room two hundred... I was just about to call her parents but since her best friend is here, I think you can handle it.”

Harry smiled his thanks and as quickly as he could, without running, rushed to her room. The door was open and she was staring out the window with a lost expression on her face. His heart fell at the state she was in and he collected himself before knocking softly on the door.

The noise startled her and she spun around to the door. A wide smile started to fill her face before she looked to the floor in shame. “Hi, Harry,” she said quietly and fidgeted uncomfortably on the edge of the bed.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” he asked quietly, stepping into the room but keeping his distance at her nervousness.

“Better now,” she replied with a slight smile. “I thought Susan was going to call my parents...”

“I happened to be in the waiting room when she walked through,” Harry explained. Hermione looked up at him curiously and he smiled softly. “Tonks had an accident and I had to apparate her here. She fell, broke her leg and got knocked unconscious...”

“I hope she’ll be alright...” Hermione said worriedly.

“She’ll be fine. It seems she’s a legend around here,” he chuckled softly. They fell into a deafeningly awkward silence and Harry cleared his throat. “I got your letter today and you’ve done nothing that requires forgiveness, Hermione.”

“I ruined a perfectly good afternoon with you, Harry...” she started and jumped when he set a hand on her shoulder.

"No, you didn't," he said firmly. "I brought up something you weren't comfortable talking to me about and you reacted normally. The relationship that you have with Ron is none of my business."

She looked at him and smiled softly. "I wish it was as easy to talk to you about everything like it used to be," she said sadly.

Harry sat next to her and put a comforting arm around her shoulders, she stiffened slightly at the touch, but this time he didn't relent. "Hermione, how long have you had stomach problems?"

"Oh, well, for the past three years," she admitted with a shrug. "They started after we finished Hogwarts. You know me, worrying about this or that," she said with a slightly nervous chuckle. "We just haven't had enough money to pay for the potions. As luck would have it, I made a slight breakthrough and got a bonus at work. I had an attack today but was able to make it here via Floo."

"Does Ron know about this?" Harry asked concernedly.

Hermione nodded. "He thinks it's partly ulcer, partly in my head," she admitted. "After the last few times I had to come here, he figured I'd be ok with the supply of pain killers and potions we got last time."

"Hey, if you need anyone to pick you up again, send Hedwig, I'll be here as quick as I can," Harry said softly as he rubbed her back. "I know that it might cause some friction, but I'm here if you need me."

Hermione smiled thankfully and patted his knee before slowly standing from the bed. "Thanks, Harry," she said after she'd finally gotten to her feet. "But you don't have to do that; you must be busy with work."

"Tonks can cover for me," he said with a reassuring smile. "Why don't we get you home and into bed?"

"You don't mind?" she asked with a slight smile.

"Of course not! How many times did you watch over me when I was in the hospital wing at Hogwarts?" he asked with a smile as he led

her out into the hallway. "I didn't know that you and Ron almost broke up because of me, sorry about that."

Hermione stopped and looked at him. "Why are you sorry about that?" She began walking again after he motioned for her to follow. "I mean, I was ignoring him for two weeks, he was bound to get upset over it. I didn't think he'd leave me because of that... I just couldn't bear it if you died."

"I couldn't have either," Harry said with a soft chuckle. He was rewarded with a smile and smiled in return. It took them a while to reach the lobby where another mediwitch approached Harry.

"Mr. Potter? Your partner has just woken and is asking for you," she said with a flirtatious smile then gave him the room number before continuing with her duties.

"Hey, want to stop by and say hi to Tonks?" Harry asked with a grin. "It's been some time since you two have seen one another as well."

Hermione thought for a moment, looked at the large clock in the lobby and smiled. "I think I have time for a visit," she said after considering the request. Harry smiled and the two of them slowly made their way to Tonks' room.

"Wotcher, Hermione?" Tonks said with a smile as the two of them stepped inside. Hermione smiled and waved nervously as Harry stepped into the room.

"I found her wandering around so I thought I'd bring her in for a visit," he said with a smile. "How's your leg and head?" Harry pulled up a chair for Hermione then kissed Tonks on the forehead before leaning against the wall.

"I'll be fine in the morning," she said with a slight smile. "Just waiting for the potions to work and I'll be ready to go after that."

"How did it happen?" Hermione asked concernedly.

"Ah, you know me, tripping over something or other," Tonks said with a laugh. "I just happened to trip over my cloak while we were climbing

down a metal ladder in a thunderstorm. I didn't think it was wise to be on one with lightning blasting around the area."

"She took a tumble, I tried to help, but her hands were too slick from the rain," Harry added with an apologetic smile to Tonks. "Sorry about that, I couldn't get my wand out fast enough to levitate you."

"You got me here fast enough," she said with a shrug. "No heavy lifting for two days though, so you'll be doing most of the packing," she said with a grin. "Nobody said that accidents didn't have purpose!"

"Luckily for me we don't have much," Harry retorted with a grin. "Just our clothes and three trunks to worry about..."

"You two are moving?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"New assignment," Tonks said with a smile. "Undercover operation so we can't say much."

"The Auror division must have a field day with two Metamorphmagi in their ranks," Hermione said with a smile. She glanced at her watch, which she'd been doing subconsciously throughout the visit, and frowned.

"Ah, you need to get home for Ron's next call?" Harry put in as he bent to help her up.

"I'm sorry to cut this short," Hermione said apologetically.

"You can keep in touch with Hedwig," Tonks said with a smile. "It was nice to see you again, maybe next time we can talk about you instead of my two left feet?"

Hermione snorted out a laugh and shook her head. "I'll try to, Ron comes home tomorrow and time tends to slip away quickly after that."

"Do you two have a date set yet?" Tonks asked with her smile still in place.

Hermione looked at her in confusion then smiled wistfully and shook her head. "No, he hasn't proposed yet, but we'll see what happens."

"Take care, Hermione," Tonks said with a wave. "Don't be a stranger!"

Hermione waved and smiled as Harry escorted her into the hall. "I'll be back in a little bit. I'm just going to take her home."

"Take your time, Harry," Tonks said with a wink.

Hermione held a small smile on her face through their slow walk back to the lobby and the hospital's apparition point. "Oh, I can't apparate while taking these painkillers, Harry," she said apologetically. "Actually, I can't take any magical transportation. It's one of the things that irritated Ron about these visits."

"I'm sure we can manage the Muggle way," he said with a smile. Harry walked her to the exit and after a moment, they found themselves standing in the small alcove that served as the Hospital's entrance. "I'll get us a taxi, wait here," he said and dashed off into the darkness. A few minutes later, he jumped out of a car and helped her into the back seat. She gave the address and the two of them were on their way to her cottage.

"Thank you for seeing me home," Hermione said quietly. "I thought I'd have to wait for my parents..."

"Is that a bad thing?" he asked nonchalantly, turning from gazing out the window to her. "You've always been close."

"We... ah... haven't been on speaking terms since Ron and I moved in together," Hermione admitted quietly. "They weren't happy about it and tried to belittle our relationship. They just didn't see how much we care for each other," she said absently as if it were a rehearsed answer.

"I'm sorry," Harry said sympathetically. He laid a hand on her arm and patted it gently. "You know about my parents and I thought it was wonderful that you had yours to talk to."

"You don't have to apologize, Harry," she said with a sigh. "Ron and I decided that it was best if we didn't stir anything up with them, they were angry enough as it was."

"We're here, Madam, Sir," the driver said as he pulled over.

Harry looked out the window to see Hermione and Ron's cottage standing defiantly in the darkness. The lights were on in the sitting room and Hermione gasped in surprise.

"Ron's home early!" she said with a wince. "I didn't finish the laundry or the dishes before I left..." She struggled to get out of the car as quickly as she could.

"Hermione, calm down, you're going to aggravate your condition," Harry said sternly. He paid the driver and opened the door. "Don't worry about anything, get inside and get some rest."

"Harry, I don't know what Ron will do if he sees you!" she said worriedly.

"Don't worry about it," Harry said calmly. "He's treated me coldly for so long that I don't remember him being my friend."

"Harry!" she scolded in a very Molly Weasley-like manner as he helped her out of the car. "You might not be best friends anymore but that's no way to think! We've had many good times together, you can't have forgotten those."

Harry told the driver he could go and helped Hermione up the stairs to the front door. "I haven't forgotten, Hermione. I remember how Ron was and it makes me sad how things changed. He's different now," Harry said sadly. "If you need anything, anything at all, I'm just an owl away, Hermione."

She nodded and smiled gently. "I can make it from here, Harry," she said quietly just before she grimaced at the first step.

"I can take you to the door," Harry said reassuringly, "and before you say anything, I don't care if Ron is upset with me for bringing you home, somebody had to and I'm glad that somebody was me."

Hermione smiled genuinely and didn't refuse his help up the steps to her front porch. Just as she opened the screened porch door, the main door opened and a very livid redhead appeared in front of them.

Chapter Four

Redheads, Brunettes and Still No Answers

"What is *he* doing here?" Ron asked Hermione stiffly.

"It's not what you think, Ron," Hermione said quickly. "I was at the hospital and he brought me home."

"So you call *him* instead of your *boyfriend*?" Ron spat accusingly.

"I was at the hospital with Tonks," Harry said coolly. "She had an accident and Hermione needed to get home the Muggle way because of her medication."

Ron glanced menacingly at Harry then took Hermione's arm. "I can take it from here," he said coldly and pulled Hermione into the house.

Harry watched angrily as the door closed forcefully in his face and his blood boiled when Ron began shouting. He thought about bursting in and knocking some sense into him but Hermione somehow calmed Ron down. Harry let the porch door slam and with a quick look around, apparated back to St. Mungo's.

"Hermione's really changed, you weren't kidding," Tonks said when Harry stepped back in the room. "She was so quiet, not like what I remembered at all."

Harry grunted and slumped in the chair that Hermione had been in just an hour or so beforehand. "Ron was home when we arrived," he announced with venom dripping from each word. "I was tempted to break their door down and beat the hell out of him. He was yelling at her for having me bring her home!"

"You're kidding me!" Tonks said in disbelief. She winced suddenly and stiffened with a groan. Harry took her hand and squeezed it slightly. "Thanks," She said through gritted teeth. "You did a good job setting my leg, but the Skele-Mend still stings."

"I had to re-grow the bones in my right arm after Lockhart tried to heal it," he said with a grimace. "I'm glad that he's still stuck in the mental ward here."

"That must have hurt," Tonks said with a sigh. Harry handed her a glass of water that was sitting on her nightstand and she took a sip. "Thanks. I can't imagine re-growing an entire arm..."

"Why did they feed you Skele-Mend instead of using a wand?" Harry asked quizzically. "Surely that'd be faster?"

"With the concussion they didn't think the spell would hold for some reason," she explained with a tired shrug. "I've gone through this before, the first few hours are the hardest, after that, when the itching starts, it isn't as bad."

"Hermione was here due to stomach problems," Harry said quietly after a moment. "It seems she worries a lot and Ron thinks it's all in her head."

"That doesn't sound too good," Tonks said with a nod. "She winced when you kissed me on the forehead, by the way. I think she was jealous."

"She's always had a problem with me and other women," Harry said with a grin. A dreamy look entered his eyes as he remembered her reactions to Cho and Ginny's subsequent attempt later that summer. "I wish I would have seen the signs sooner," he admitted with a sigh. "Maybe..."

"There's no use in living in the past, Harry." Tonks said softly as she stroked his arm. "Why don't you get some rest? I'll be ready to go tomorrow morning."

Harry nodded and smiled gently at his friend before leaning in and kissing her tenderly. "Sleep well," he whispered as they parted. Tonks smiled slyly and winked.

"You know, I could get used to having you around... Hermione doesn't know what she's missing."

Harry chuckled. "If Ron has any say, she never will. Goodnight, Tonks, I'll see you tomorrow. You can't lift, but you can sure pack!" He laughed when she stuck out her tongue and he waved before heading back to the apparition point and disappearing.

Harry looked around their temporary flat the next morning, making sure everything was accounted for and in one trunk or another. Tonks was lounging comfortably on the sofa with her leg elevated.

"It looks like everything is accounted for except for Hedwig," Harry said as he tossed the remaining leftovers and half-eaten food in the dust bin. The Wizarding device munched away happily on a box of Chinese take away while Harry wiped down the counters and Tonks joined him by sweeping the floors.

"We don't have to be at the new house for another few days, Harry," Tonks said as she dumped the floor refuse into the dustbin and sat at the small table. "Why don't you stop by your flat and see to things there?"

"There's nothing there but my clothes and old Hogwarts things," Harry said with a shrug. "We'd be better off working on our disguises."

"Why don't I come with? You've never shown me your place," Tonks added with a smile.

Harry shrugged. "I guess we could, there's nothing spectacular about it, but sure. Let me get our luggage there and I'll come back for you. Let Hedwig know if she comes back before I do."

"Apparation is pretty quick. I think she'll figure it out on her own," Tonks said with a chuckle.

Harry nodded and with a few quiet pops, had their luggage sitting in his entry way. He apparated back to the temporary flat and with his help, Tonks joined him.

"Harry Potter has returned! Did he do well on his last assignment?" a small squeaky voice asked from behind them.

Harry turned and smiled. "Nothing good on the last one, Dobby, and this is Tonks, she's welcome here."

"Dobby is happy to meet a friend of Harry Potter's," Dobby said with an exaggerated bow. "Do Harry Potter and his friend wish to have lunch?"

“Only if you’re having lunch as well,” Harry said with another smile. “Don’t worry about the luggage, Dobby. We’re going to take it with us on our next assignment.”

“Dobby understands. Dobby has sorted Harry Potter’s mail and Hedwig flew in a few minutes ago,” Dobby said as he snapped his fingers and hung their cloaks for them. “Dobby has the mail on the table in the kitchens and will start lunch,” the house-elf snapped his fingers again and disappeared.

“You have a house elf in your flat?!” Tonks asked in a harsh whisper. “That’s a first!”

“Well, this isn’t exactly a flat,” Harry said with an embarrassed shrug. “And Dobby works for me. He’s been free for some time now.”

“You pay wages to an elf...” Tonks said in disbelief as she examined the entrance hall and shook her head. “And this is too big, even for a house.”

“This is actually my ancestral castle,” he said after a moment.

“Castle? You must be loaded!” Tonks let out a low whistle. “Why’d you never tell me?”

“Nobody really knows,” Harry said as he led her to the kitchens. “I inherited my parent’s estate in full when I turned twenty-one. The only one who knows is Diggle and I had him swear secrecy.”

“When you said you liked your privacy, you weren’t joking, were you?” Tonks continued to take in her new surroundings as they made their trek and smiled when the smell of lunch reached her nose. “It’s been ages since I’ve had a good home cooked meal...”

Harry nodded as he opened the door to the kitchens and smiled at what awaited them. Two or three courses beginning with soup and ending with dessert sat at the table. By Harry’s normal seat were several stacks of mail, sorted in order of importance, and Hedwig was at her perch, letter attached and nibbling on an owl treat.

"No matter where I am, you seem to find me, Hedwig," Harry said with a laugh as she nipped his finger in greeting. He stroked her immaculate, white feathers before he accepted the letter then joined Tonks at the table. He set aside the new correspondence and began to shuffle through the rest of the parcels that lined the table.

"Dobby was unsure where to place parcels that were larger, so Dobby put them in the storage room," the diminutive elf said eagerly as Harry sifted through the junk mail piles quickly.

He immediately pitched those that didn't interest him — which was nearly every letter in the first two piles — into the closest dustbin and shook his head. "They're still sending me offers to work at Hogwarts," he said with the shake of his head. Harry stopped himself from pitching the letter, looked at Tonks then back to the job offer. "This might come in handy..." he said with a slow grin forming on his face. "How would you like to be married to the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts?" Harry asked with a fully formed smile.

"Wouldn't we be living at the castle?" she asked with a gleam in her eye. "I haven't had Hogwarts food in a long time."

"I'll talk with Dumbledore, I'm sure he'll let us live in Hogsmeade, but the house elves there cater to all the professors and their families, within reason that is," he said with a short laugh. "I *do* have to find a job there after all, and spending it teaching might be a new experience to add to my skill set." Harry noticed that Dobby wasn't moving anymore and he looked over to see his small friend staring at Harry with wide eyes. "What's wrong, Dobby?"

"H-Harry P-Potter is getting m-married?" Dobby squeaked in a high-pitched voice. "Why didn't Harry Potter say so?"

Harry smiled in understanding and shook his head. "It's undercover work, Dobby, the marriage isn't real."

Dobby let out a breath of relief and slumped back in his chair. "Dobby didn't know if he would have time to arrange catering or have the castle ready for a wedding!" he smiled apologetically. "And Dobby didn't think he'd marry anyone other than his Hermione Granger."

The mention of her name returned Harry's attention to the letter he'd just received. He smiled wanly and shook his head. "She's not going to marry *me*, Dobby," he said quietly as he opened her letter.

Dear Harry,
Thank you for bringing me home last night. I'm sorry that Ron treated you so badly. I explained to him what happened and he calmed down. He went to bed shortly after you dropped me off and I was able to finish the chores before turning in as well. It was nice visiting Tonks, please tell her 'hello' for me. I hope she's feeling better! If you want to visit, the only time I'm free is when Ron is at practice, he's usually gone for four hours or so. Oh, his alarm just went off, I have to get breakfast ready. Hope to talk to you soon!
Love from
Hermione

"Hermione says hello," Harry said as he set her letter in the most important pile before grabbing his flatware. "She's apologized on Ron's behalf for last night if you can believe that."

"He wasn't going to," Tonks said around a mouthful of sandwich. "She's trying, Harry, there's just a problem with time."

Harry nodded absently as he flipped through more mail, pitching even more to the dustbin as he went along. "I'm going to set up a private meeting with Dumbledore," he said after a few minutes. "We've got what, one and a half to two years for this next assignment?"

Tonks nodded as she washed down her latest mouthful with a bit of butterbeer. "They want us to become a part of the community. It looks like they're not in too much of a hurry to track this guy down."

"We should expand our search for animagi as well, there's a good chance he may have gone native," Harry said after some thought. "I'm going to Floo the headmaster now, Dobby, could you show Tonks to my room when she's finished?"

"To Harry Potter's room, sir?" Dobby asked cautiously. "There are many fine guest rooms..."

Harry smiled and shook his head. "My room is fine. Could you transfigure the bed to twice its size?"

"Of course, Dobby will do as Dobby is asked."

"Thank you Dobby. I don't know how long I'll be so please make yourself at home," He patted Tonks' shoulder as he left for the sitting room. "Hogwarts: Headmaster's office!" Harry called clearly as he threw in a pinch of powder then knelt and stuck his head in the green flames. "Albus, are you about?"

"Ah, Harry, please, come in," the old wizard said with a smile from behind his desk. With a whoosh and a flare of green flame, Harry stepped into the headmaster's office and quickly muttered a cleaning charm on himself before shaking his mentor's hand. "What brings you here on this fine afternoon?"

"I received the latest invitation to teach the defense class," Harry explained as he took a seat. "There were a few things I wanted to discuss with you about the position."

"You've considered? Excellent, of course we can discuss the position, what's on your mind?"

"To tell you the truth, Tonks and I are on an undercover assignment here in Hogsmeade. I can't go into particulars, and we're to pose as a married couple. I understand there are accommodations for professors and their families here at the school. The problem being we need to live in Hogsmeade."

"Housing accommodations are available here, as you have surmised, however it is not unheard of for professors to live off school grounds. Madam Hooch lives in Hogsmeade rather than the school, but you'll have certain responsibilities that will require you here once, maybe twice weekly for hall patrols and grounds duties."

Harry nodded. "I think that would work. Another issue would be my identity. Being Harry Potter has more disadvantages than advantages when working on a case. I'll need to disguise myself, as will Tonks, for the duration. You can send word that I've turned down the position again and we can work with my alter ego instead."

"I'm sure that will have no bearing on your experience," Dumbledore said with a smile.

Harry smiled in return. "I'll brief my supervisors that you should be informed of the situation, it might affect students if something happens during a Hogsmeade trip. I'll notify them that I've obtained a position here and I'll have the necessary paperwork forwarded to you."

"That will be fine, Harry," Albus said with a smile. "How are Ron and Hermione? Things were a tad shaky when you three finished your time here, has the situation improved?"

Harry frowned and gently shook his head. "No, Ron still wants me out of their lives it seems. Hermione's changed tremendously since I'd last seen her," he said, thinking for a moment then nodded. "I think Ron might be controlling her somehow, not with the imperius, but through lies and manipulation."

"That doesn't sound like the two bright students I've had the honor of seeing grow over the years," Dumbledore said with his long fingers steeped before him.

"It doesn't. Hermione's gained weight due to inactivity, she has no friends, doesn't read anything but cookbooks and what deals with work, and I'm surprised that she turned down the offer to take over for Minerva," Harry explained as he rubbed his chin.

"Frankly, we were surprised as well. She would have made an excellent addition to the Hogwarts' staff," Albus said quietly. "Her refusal of the offer wasn't like her either, settling for a lower paying job in the Ministry..."

"She's been working on a cure for Lycanthropy and just recently made a breakthrough," Harry said after a moment. "She could have discovered it years ago if she had the proper time to research the subject, but most of it is spent keeping the house in order and feeding Ron. I don't think he could handle coming back to school, even as a spouse or significant other. Is the position still open?"

"We haven't found anyone to fill that position as of yet," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye. "Do you think she'll change her mind?"

"I don't think so, not right away. I spoke with her recently and she said she missed school... but I think she may take the position if she and Ron weren't together..." Harry shook his head. "That won't happen anytime soon, she's quite convinced that they're in love. I don't doubt they are, but you'd think she would be happier about it."

Dumbledore nodded as Harry stood from his chair. "I'll get the information to you and notify Moody and Kingsley about the plan to work here. It may take a few weeks with the red tape and everything, but I think it's a go."

"It was nice to speak with you again, Harry, I hope relations amongst you three improve. It's a terrible shame how such a wonderful friendship disintegrated," Albus saw him to the fireplace and clapped him on the shoulder as they shook hands.

"It is, but hopefully things will work themselves out," Harry said with a slight smile. He threw a pinch of powder in the fireplace and once inside called "Home" clearly and with a whoosh, he was standing in the sitting room once again. After muttering another cleaning charm on himself, found Tonks sound asleep in his newly transfigured bed.

Not wanting to wake her, he decided that he may as well talk to Moody about the new developments and an hour later returned with an affirmative and the clearance to speak with Dumbledore about anything that might involve the students. His paperwork was filled out and Flooed to the headmaster, complete with the identities of himself and Tonks.

"Dobby, I'm going to Diagon Alley to do some shopping. Tonks needs her sleep, but if I'm not back by time she's awake, let her know?"

"Dobby understands, Harry Potter," he said with a hesitant smile.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked as he changed into a different set of robes and tossed the set he had been wearing into the hamper.

“Dobby is wondering why Harry Potter and Harry Potter’s friend are sharing a room...” Dobby cringed as if he were about to be struck but opened an eye and smiled nervously when Harry laughed.

“It’s nothing to worry about, Dobby. We keep each other company since we’ve only got each other for the time being,” Harry explained and clapped his friend’s shoulder followed by an amused smile. “I’ll be back later today,” he said and disappeared.

Harry looked over the list of supplies he’d obtained from Hogwarts for his new job and decided to browse for the schoolbooks that would be needed first. He stepped into Flourish and Blotts and quickly found the defense section. Harry studied each book with a calculating eye for use in the post Voldemort era but kept a lookout for anything new. He’d just returned a book to the shelf when he felt someone breathing down his neck.

I should have been paying attention, damn it! he cursed as he inched towards his wand. The tip of what he sought dug into his back causing him to freeze in an instant.

“Don’t go for your wand, Harry,” Ron said in an angry growl. “Keep away from her.”

Harry turned around when Ron’s wand was no longer pressed in his back to find that his former friend had just disappeared. Anger started to bubble from the pit of his stomach and it took every ounce of self-control to keep himself from bashing down their front door and hexing Ron to high heaven. Instead, he sat on the floor and took several deep breaths to calm himself. Harry stood once again and cursed under his breath as he went about his previous business.

He’d gone through several stores, stopping by Eeylops at one point for special treats for Hedwig, and grabbed a few icecream cones for Tonks, Dobby and himself. Harry arrived home to find Tonks and Dobby spending some quiet time in the sitting room chatting about the goings on of the castle.

“I thought you might like a treat,” Harry said with a smile. “Banana strawberry for the lady, and if I’m not mistaken, the orange sorbet is Dobby’s favorite.”

"Harry Potter is too kind to Dobby," Dobby said with a smile, gladly accepting the treat from Harry.

"How did shopping go, Harry?" Tonks asked as she happily lapped up a few drips that were running down her cone.

"I ran into Ron," Harry said with an undercurrent of disgust. "He actually pulled his wand on me then told me to stay away from Hermione."

"Didn't you show him who the boss was?" she asked with wide eyes.

"No, he disappeared before I had a chance to curse him, the ruddy coward," Harry spat.

"I don't understand what happened with Harry Potter and his Wheezy," Dobby said perplexed. "He was most important to Harry Potter."

"Things change, Dobby," Harry said with a sigh. "I don't know what's happened to him. He changed drastically during my sixth year at Hogwarts."

"Could it have been those brain things that attacked him?" Tonks asked quietly.

Harry shook his head. "Ron was fine after that, he'd been stung, but Dumbledore was able to cure him of the conflicting thoughts," he explained with a wave of his hand. "Are you up for a visit to the Burrow? I'm sure Molly and Arthur would be happy for a bit of company," Harry said with a smile to Tonks shortly after they'd finished their treats in comfortable silence. "I haven't seen them in quite some time and I think it's about time for a visit."

"That sounds like fun," Tonks said with a sly grin. "Or is this a fact finding mission?"

Harry grinned in return as stepped in front of the fireplace. "A little of both, I'd say." For the fourth time that day, Harry found himself on the floor with his head immersed in a roar of green flames. "Mrs. Weasley? Are you home?" he called into the kitchen of the Burrow.

There was some shuffling upstairs and someone rushing down the stairs to the kitchen. "Harry dear, it's good to see you!" Molly said with a bright smile. "Why has it taken so long for you to say hello?"

"It's a long story," he said with a slight grin. "Do you fancy a couple of old friends stopping in for a visit? Tonks is with me and we thought it might be a good time to stop by."

"Of course, dear, you're always welcome here!" Molly said with a smile. "I'll just start the tea while you step on through the Floo."

Harry grinned and a few minutes later, he and Tonks were laughing with Mrs. Weasley and Ginny at the kitchen table.

"You should have seen the look on his face!" Molly said with another laugh. "Imagine, *Draco Malfoy* being carried off by half a score of garden gnomes!"

Ginny chuckled politely, but Harry could see the hurt in her eyes. He put a hand on her arm and patted it gently. "So how are Ron and Hermione?" he asked in an attempt to change the subject.

Molly looked at him strangely for a moment. "Oh, I'm sorry, dear. I forgot that you haven't been speaking since Ron and Hermione started dating," she said with a sigh. "You three were inseparable back then but I guess they're fine... Ron sends owls when he's on the road and I haven't talked to poor Hermione since Draco was ejected from the property."

"Poor Hermione?" Tonks asked curiously.

"The dear is home alone when Ron is out of town or practicing. It's almost as if they've been pushing everybody away from some secret they're keeping... I haven't seen Ron in three years!"

"Mum, Ron's cut off relations with everyone, even Fred and George... even *me*," Ginny said sadly. "He still hasn't forgiven me for dating 'a *Malfoy*'" she said sarcastically, "and still refuses to let me visit. The last time I snuck over to see Hermione he went spare."

Molly looked at her daughter in shock. "Ron's always been stubborn, but this is getting ridiculous."

Harry nodded. "I ran into Hermione in the hospital, she has stomach problems from worrying," he explained quickly. "When she had nobody to take her home, I did and Ron went off on her for calling me for help instead of him. He was supposed to be out of town but came back early, much to Hermione's surprise."

The four of them sat around the table sipping their tea and listening to the clock tick the time off slowly, each of them digesting what was said and lost in their own thoughts. "Maybe we should hold a Muggle-style intervention?" Ginny asked after a moment.

"But they're used for people with drug or alcohol problems, aren't they?" Harry asked thoughtfully. "I mean, I guess we could at least find out what Ron's problem is, but that might push him farther away and he'd take Hermione with him."

"There's that possibility," Ginny said with a sigh. "I haven't seen her happy since that summer you were ill."

"That was a lie," Harry said evenly. "Ron came up with that story after he'd told me to stay home. I think this might all stem from jealousy and here I thought I'd seen the brunt of it during the Tri-Wizard Tournament."

"I remember that," Ginny said quietly. "The git wouldn't believe you and he got even angrier when Hermione did."

"There was a lot going on then," Molly said with a slight blush. "I treated Hermione so unfairly."

"She's still getting Howlers about Skeeter's articles," Harry growled then let it slide into a sigh. "At least a catch box was set up after the bubotuber pus letter she received..."

"The poor dear," Molly said with a sigh. "I think I'll bake some biscuits and visit her this week."

"She'd like that," Harry said with a smile. "I think I'm going to pay a visit to her parents and see how they're getting on. Hermione told me they haven't spoken since she and Ron moved into their cottage." He and Tonks stood and after hugs from the Weasley women, were strolling through the garden. They disappeared and continued their stroll not too far from the Granger's house. Harry rang the bell, hoping that one of the doctors was home and he was rewarded with Hermione's mother.

"Hello?" she asked tentatively, looking curiously at the two people on her front stoop. Her gaze fell on Harry then to his forehead and she smiled slightly. "Harry, what brings you by?" She opened the door but didn't offer them an invitation into her home.

"Actually, I stopped by to talk about Hermione," he announced cautiously. He didn't want her becoming angry with him. "I haven't seen her in so long and met with her the other day. She's changed a lot," he explained at the cross look her mother was giving him.

"Hermione hasn't spoken to us for three years, Harry," she said curtly. "I'm sorry, but we don't know what's happened." Her eyes softened somewhat and Harry saw the pain she was hiding when he glanced into them.

"She said you got into an argument when she and Ron moved in together," Harry offered, "and seems rather protective of their relationship."

Dr. Granger sighed and nodded. "We didn't think that she was old enough to make that kind of decision. Hermione looked like she was about to agree, but after she talked to *him*, she changed her mind. There was a tremendous row then she stormed out of here with her things. We haven't seen or heard from her since."

Harry put a comforting hand on her shoulder and patted it gently. "I know how you feel, they pushed me away at school and it's been hard not talking to her. At this point, I'm not sure I want to see Mr. Weasley again."

"Harry, if you see her again, could you tell her that we miss her?" Dr. Granger said sadly.

“You have my word,” Harry said with a soft smile and before he could turn around, Hermione’s mother hugged him tightly.

“Thank you, Harry,” she whispered then went into the house and shut the door.

Harry and Tonks stared at the brick-red door for a few seconds afterwards before slowly turning to the street. Harry wracked his mind trying to pinpoint what exactly happened with Hermione. He sighed when he came to the conclusion that it wasn’t going to be easy.

Chapter Five

Sorting the New Professor

Harry and Tonks were walking down the street, each deep in thought, when Harry's anger started to get the best of him. "I can't stand this, Tonks!" he growled in frustration. "She pushed her family away, pushed her friends away, and all for Ron?!"

"People do strange things, Harry," Tonks said with a shrug. "If she'd known how you felt, things might have been different."

"Well, I never told her," he said with a frustrated sigh. "And it's too late now..."

"How can it be too late? She's not married to him yet!" Tonks said consolingly. "Tell her how you feel."

"If she's willing to push away her own mother and father, what makes you think she'll turn away from Ron for me?" he asked glumly.

"You have a lot to offer," she said as they apparated to the castle's entrance hall. "I may be biased, but you're damn good looking, you're kind, gentle, friendly, intelligent... there's a good reason she was friends with you for so long. She even wants that friendship back!"

"Friendship, Tonks," Harry said sadly. "We need to get our stuff moved to the new house soon, I'll see about spending some time with her after we get settled in, but we need to keep our minds on our assignment."

"Harry, life isn't all about work," she said as she set a hand on his shoulder and turned him around. "It won't be easy, but you should try to let her know how you feel."

Harry looked into his partner's eyes and half-smiled. "We'll see," he said half-heartedly. *If she's so in love with Ron, telling her how I feel will just push her away and I'll lose her friendship again,* he added silently. "There's only the problem of getting in to see her. After Ron's little declaration, there's a good chance he's warded the house to let him know if I've been there."

"You'll find a way," Tonks said with a smile. "You always do."

Later that night, Harry sent Hedwig off with a letter for Hermione asking when a good time would be to see her in the next few weeks. The next morning, Hedwig returned with her reply.

Dear Harry,
Ron's set new wards around the cottage and garden to keep you away. I was so infuriated with him when he did that! He wouldn't tell me why... you used to be my best friend and I was hoping to at least start some sort of friendship up with you again. I explained that I felt lonely when he wasn't home and I needed a friend to talk to. He stormed out of the house! Harry, he means so much to me, what can I do? I don't want to be left alone! What if he leaves me? I don't know if I could handle that! I'll be at Molly's for lunch today, please come over? I really need someone to talk to.
Love from
Hermione

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Hey, Tonks, how much time do we have before we have to be at the new house?" he asked as he walked into his sitting room. "Hermione is having problems and needs someone to talk to today."

"Not till after tea, Harry," she replied from one of the overstuffed chairs. She lazily flipped a page in her dossier and looked up with a smile. "Let her know how you feel, give her a choice."

"She's afraid she's going to lose Ron," Harry said sadly. "I doubt she'd be thinking about moving from him to me straight away."

"It'll take time," Tonks said reassuringly. "But the option will be there, she could think that Ron is her only choice."

"That's ridiculous!" Harry snorted. "She's beautiful, intelligent, and wonderful how can she think that Ron is her only choice?"

"Think about it, Harry, she poured herself into her schoolwork because she felt nobody liked her. You, Ron, and Ginny were her only close friends and look where everyone is..."

Harry nodded. "Since we have time, I'll stop by the Burrow. Let's hope that Ron didn't decide to come over as well."

"You'll deal with that if it happens," Tonks said with a reassuring grin. "She needs you, Harry, get over there."

Harry let the Floo powder fly and with the Burrow still echoing in his sitting room, he stumbled into the Weasley's kitchen once again.

"Harry! I didn't expect you to come over today," Molly said with a smile. She bustled from the stove to give him a quick hug before returning to lunch preparations.

"Hermione asked me to stop by," he admitted quietly. "Is Ron coming as well?"

"No, he's off somewhere with his teammates," Hermione said with a frown from the sitting room. She looked to him and smiled. "I'm glad you stopped by."

"As I understand it, you needed someone to talk to, so here I am," he said with a soft smile. He scanned her over for marks, in case Ron had gotten physical with her. Since she was wearing a sundress, any marks on her arms, neck, or legs would have been visible, unless she healed them. "Did you want to get some privacy?"

Hermione looked nervously at Molly and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"How's your stomach doing?" he asked in a whisper. He nodded when she mouthed 'not now' and with a smile he turned to his surrogate mother. "I'm going to steal her away for a little bit, how long until everything's ready?"

"Take your time," Mrs. Weasley said with a smile. "There's still an hour yet before lunch is ready."

Harry believed the woman when she gave him cooking times and he smiled at his friend. "Shall we head out to the Quidditch pitch?" he asked as he offered her his hand. She took it with a smile and nodded. "We'll be back shortly," Harry announced to his host and the two of them began a slow walk to the Weasley's makeshift pitch.

They had been walking for just a few minutes when Harry noticed the tears glistening in her eyes. He stopped and quickly dried them from her cheeks as they spilled out. "Hermione, you can tell me anything you need to," he said softly. She didn't back away from his touch and he didn't feel her stiffen like she had before, much to his relief.

"I think Ron's going to leave me for real this time," she said quietly. "All I wanted was a friend to talk to..." She sighed and they continued their walk to the pitch. "I love him Harry, I really do and I know he loves me, I just feel like I've gotten too fat for him or I don't do enough to make him happy."

They stopped in the shade of the trees that surrounded the field where he'd played so many pick up games of Quidditch during summer holiday. Harry felt a pang in his heart when he thought of his long lost best friend, but set that aside for the one who needed him at the moment. Without hesitation, he took Hermione by the hand and guided her to the tree where she used to read when he and Ron were on their brooms. Harry sat at the tree's base, his back resting firmly against it, and pulled her down next to him.

"First, let me tell you that you're not fat, Hermione," Harry said gently. "You've changed, yes, but you're far from fat. Dudley, now he's fat!" Hermione snorted a laugh in reply but Harry continued. "Second, you cleaned the house when you were supposed to be resting, that's devotion if I've ever seen it. Does *he* help around the house?"

"It takes quite a lot of pressure to get him to help with the housework and it's just so much easier for me to do it myself instead of argue with him," she admitted. "It's not all that difficult, just time consuming."

Harry nodded. "How often are you home alone?" He thought it was an innocent enough question and he jumped at Hermione's tone.

"Are you interrogating me, Harry?" she asked somewhat annoyed.

"No, I'm just trying to get a feel for what your life is like now," he said with his hands up in an attempt to calm her down. "I don't know what it's like for you two, and until recently, I've never been invited over. Ron seems to like it that way."

Hermione softened at his response and nodded. "I'm sorry, Harry, sometimes I'm so wrapped up in how things used to be that I forget nobody knows how things are now."

"To change the subject, for now, how is your stomach doing?" he asked quietly.

"The potions and painkillers help," she said with a shrug. "I'm just getting tired of not having the money to keep the treatments up. As soon as I start feeling better, we run out and I relapse. It seems like a never ending cycle."

"The Ministry doesn't take care of your medical bills?" Harry asked incredulously.

"My department doesn't have the funding that yours does," she said with a sigh. "They cover the basics, but prolonged treatment is out-of-pocket."

Harry nodded. "Have you thought about Hogwarts again? They'd be able to pay more and handle your medical..."

"Ron and I have talked about it several times but we've decided that it would be best to stay with the Ministry," she explained.

"Did you both decide or just Ron?" Harry asked quietly. He braced himself for the angry reply that was coming and wasn't disappointed.

"What do you mean? We make decisions together, Harry!" Hermione said with an elevated, even, tone of voice.

"The only thing I understand is Ron has all the freedom and you're trapped at home like a slave!" Harry spat back, his patience finally getting the best of him. "I went from having two best friends to having nothing, Hermione," Harry said angrily. "One minute I'm happy and about to ask you out and the next I see you and Ron happily together. From then on I watched as Ron threw me out like an old piece of rubbish and then you followed afterwards!"

Hermione stood, her anger raised and her fists were balled tight enough that her knuckles were white. She opened her mouth to say something but Harry leapt to his feet and turned on her.

"No, you don't get to say anything! I hear that you and Ron are in love! I hear that you don't want to lose him! I hear that you're afraid that he's going to leave you! Did you ever wonder what it felt like for *ME?*!" he roared at her. "I know it sounds selfish, but I went from having two best friends to having nothing but an abusive family! I had hope and love in my heart then it was shattered when Ron happened to get to you first! I know you're not a prize, I never thought you were, Hermione," Harry growled and stopped to wipe the angry tears from his eyes. "Damn it!" He turned and stalked away from her.

"Where do you think you're going?!" Hermione shrieked after him, trying to keep up. "You sure as hell are not going to treat me like that and then walk away, Harry James Potter!"

Harry spun on his heel and stopped right in her face. "*THAT'S THE HERMIONE I REMEMBER!*" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "That's the woman I fell in love with!"

Hermione glared at him in disbelief. "What?" she asked evenly.

"You bloody heard me, Hermione," Harry said, still incensed. "I fell in love with you and it tore my heart out when I saw you with Ron." His shoulders fell with his anger spent. "You looked so happy that I felt I'd take that away if I said anything. I thought it would be ok as long as we stayed friends, like we were, but even then, that was taken away." He shook his head and looked to her apologetically. "Here I was, supposed to be your sounding board and I go off on you. I'm sorry for that."

Hermione looked at him in confusion as his tirade began to sink in. "You were going to ask me out?" Harry nodded. "Ron... Ron said that he talked to you and you urged him to talk to me."

Harry sighed. "I don't know what to tell you... I didn't talk to Ron about anything like that. When it came to girls, the extent of our conversations was Cho or asking someone to the Yule Ball in fourth year." Harry looked to the ground. "When it came to you, it was about

schoolwork and what the three of us would do on the next Hogsmeade trip. Honestly, the only ones who know my feelings for you are Dobby and Tonks; Dobby because he works for me and Tonks because we talk about everything lately.”

“That’s the second time I find out he’s lied...” Hermione said quietly.

“Hermione, I don’t know what happened to Ron, but he might have done more than just lie,” Harry said quietly. “I spoke with your mother and she asked me to tell you that they miss you. Don’t be angry with me, I just stopped by and chatted with her for a few minutes. I know it wasn’t right to go behind your back and talk to your parents, but I’m worried for you, Hermione, I really am. Your mother is too, you should see her.”

Hermione looked at him blankly and said nothing for a few moments then she looked to the ground. “Go away, Harry,” she said quietly.

“If that’s what you want, Hermione,” he replied sadly, “you know how to reach me if you want to.”

Harry turned towards the Burrow and a few moments later smiled apologetically at Mrs. Weasley. “I seem to have made things worse, not better,” Harry said with a shrug. “I won’t be staying for lunch, but I’ll keep in touch when I can.”

“I’m sure things will right themselves, dear,” Molly said with a tight hug. “Don’t be a stranger, Harry.”

“I’m not sure our friendship was strong enough to save anything now... I’ll try to stop by when I can,” he said with a small smile. Hermione stepped into the kitchen just as he stepped into the green flames of the fireplace. He raised a hand and waved before whispering his destination. Harry caught a glimpse of Hermione’s tear streaked cheeks before he was sucked through the Floo Network and deposited in his sitting room.

“You’re back early,” Tonks said concernedly from her chair. “Things didn’t go well, did they?”

“No, we argued and I told her that I loved her, but I think it was all a bit too much for her to take,” he said with a shake of his head. “It’s just what I thought would happen, she told me to go away. True, I could have been more tactful, but it felt like all I could do was beat around the bush with her and I got frustrated.”

Tonks crossed the room and pulled him into a comforting hug. “She just needs time, Harry, that’s all.”

Harry sighed and buried his head in the crook of her neck. “I don’t know, Tonks, I thought our friendship was strong before, knowing my feelings won’t make a difference at this point. I don’t think they ever would have.”

“Don’t say that, Harry,” she said tenderly. “They would have, and they might have, just give it time.”

Harry nodded slightly and stepped back. “Well, we may as well get on with our next assignment, Mrs. Baker.”

“I guess there’s no turning you away from work, is there, Mr. Baker?” Tonks said with a snort.

Harry smiled slightly but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Do we have everything in the new house?” he asked quietly as he concentrated on his new identity for the next few years. He looked up to see Tonks in her new identity and he smiled at her.

“Everything’s there, but us and Hedwig,” she said with a dazzling smile. “She left before you got back. I’m sure she’ll be waiting for us there.”

Harry let Dobby know where he could be found should anything important arise and the now disguised partners apparated to their new house. Unpacking went uneventfully and the two of them strolled hand-in-hand down the street to the market for fresh supplies. They looked at anything and everything on their way, paying close attention to the witches and wizards that were coming in and out of the shops.

The rest of the day went by quietly, a meal at the Three Broomsticks, a quick stop into Honeydukes for several bars of chocolate, and a

quick kip into Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Fred and George were racing around the store helping customers with purchases and making recommendations. Harry browsed over the familiar items and chuckled softly at the effects of a new confection.

"Welcome to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes!" Fred said cheerfully, sporting a wide smile as he bustled over to Harry and his wife. "Is there anything in particular I can help you with? A demonstration perhaps?"

Harry smiled at his unknowing friend and shook his head. "Sorry, we're new in Hogsmeade and just stopped in to see what all the fuss was about. Your store is one of the busier ones on the main street."

Fred smiled at the prospect of new customers and that they'd been attracted by the volume of business the store had been doing recently. "New in Hogsmeade you say?" he asked with a wide grin. Harry and Tonks smiled and nodded. "Have you been in one of our stores before? Our main shop is located on Diagon Alley..."

"We've seen the store but haven't gone in," Tonks said with a polite smile. "We don't have children yet and thought a joke shop wouldn't fit us that well."

"Oh, Sir, Madam, these aren't just ordinary jokes! Wizards and witches, even a squib or two, I might add, of all ages enjoy our sweet treats. They have slight side effects that are sure to make you chuckle and we haven't had a single upset customer, save for Filch at Hogwarts."

Harry laughed. "I'm sure your jokes are enjoyable, but we're not really interested."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Sir, perhaps if you were to try one of our free grab bags and make up your mind at a later time?" Fred said with a thoughtful grin.

Harry looked to Tonks as if he needed permission and she laughed sweetly at him. "Go ahead and take the grab bag, Dear, if anything blows up in the house, you'll have to do the cleaning!"

Harry laughed in return and accepted the package that Fred handed him. "Please feel free to stop in any time, Sir, though our stock tends to run low during the school term!"

Harry and Tonks thanked Fred for his generosity and friendliness before they left the shop. The couple found it hard to hold in their laughter and after they'd made it a block away, couldn't contain themselves.

"This might be a fun assignment," Harry said as he wiped a tear away and opened the door for his partner. "We have to be careful though, if anyone were to see through our cover, it would be those two."

"It's a good thing that we only had to deal with Fred!" Tonks said with another chuckle. "Both of them together would have been enough for me to lose it right there."

The couple laughed and tried one or two of the free jokes then laughed some more. The evening quickly turned into a few days and Harry found himself sitting at a round table in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, being introduced to the gathered professors.

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Mr. James Baker." Dumbledore said with a smile. Harry stood and nodded to everyone.

"It's good to be here," he said with a smile and took his seat again.

"James will be living in Hogsmeade with his wife Marion during his stay, patrol timetables will be made available by the end of the week. We will also have a new Transfiguration teacher when the term starts, allowing Minerva the opportunity to concentrate on her deputy headmistress duties. An item of note, The Ministry has informed me there may be criminal activity in Hogsmeade, more so than usual, and I would like everyone to remain on high alert during trips. James has been kind enough to offer his services as an additional chaperone while students are present due to his living arrangements."

"Where did you say you went to school, Mr. Baker?" Snape said with a slight smile that came off as more of a grimace.

"I didn't, but I spent my first few years in America's Salem Witches' Institute and finished my instruction at Beauxbatons." Harry answered smoothly. He smiled softly and his eyes glazed over. "I met Marion at Beauxbatons..." He collected himself and cleared his throat. "But that's neither here nor there," he finished with a slight chuckle.

The other professors joined in his laughter, save Snape who just glared at the new professor, and they were soon enjoying their lunch. Afterwards, McGonagall showed him to his office and classroom.

"Your course material and class timetables can be found in your desk and files. You must obtain permission before subjecting your students to the presence of live specimens in the classroom..." she said as she continued his tour and reciting the information he'd need to run the class properly. "Do you have a booklist? If not, we have several that were used in previous years."

"Thank you, but I do have a list," he said, handing her a folded piece of parchment. "Everything the students need for class is listed," he said with a smile. "And I request permission for third years and higher to experience the listed creatures, in conjunction with the Care of Magical Creatures professor, in their order listed."

"You've assembled your materials quite well, Mr. Baker," Minerva said with a smile. "Very well, I'll leave you to familiarize yourself with your office and classroom, should you need anything further, you may visit the headmaster, any of the other professors, or me. You should stop by the headmaster's office for your sorting as well."

"My sorting? I thought students were the only ones who were sorted," he said with a look of surprise.

"Each professor is sorted into one of the houses when they begin teaching if they haven't attended Hogwarts," she explained quickly. "We use the sorting hat's recommendation for appointing head of house."

Harry nodded. "I see. I'll stop by the headmaster's office in a few moments, no need to keep him waiting for me in the afternoon."

“Very well, James, welcome to Hogwarts. Albus has recommended you highly and I’d like to see you succeed here,” Minerva said with a smile before turning to the door.

“Thank you, Professor McGonagall,” Harry said with a return smile as he followed her out.

“You may call me Minerva when there are no students about,” she said nonchalantly before turning to her office.

Harry made his way to Dumbledore’s office and the wise old wizard smiled as Harry stepped through the door. “I expect everything is going according to plan?” he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Harry smiled mischievously as he sat in the offered chair. “So far, so good,” he said with a slight laugh. At Albus’ raised eyebrow, Harry explained the trip through Hogsmeade and the two of them were chuckling as he described their impromptu stop at the Weasley twins’ store. “We had to leave quickly or we would have blown our cover,” Harry said with another snort of laughter.

Dumbledore smiled delightfully. “I haven’t had a good laugh since you three were in school,” he said with an amused look. Albus reached into his desk and pulled out a small, lemon candy. “Sherbet lemon?” He asked with a smile. Harry smiled in return then took the offered candy. “After all this time, you finally take one,” Dumbledore said with a laugh.

“I need something good and sweet,” Harry said with a grin. “I’ve never had them before, so I thought I’d try for once.”

“I suppose Minerva sent you here for your sorting?” The headmaster said with a smile. “Shall we get on with it then?”

“Couldn’t we just mark down that I was sorted to Gryffindor?” Harry asked quickly.

“We could, but the sorting hat would know that you hadn’t been sorted. As before, this will be painless,” the old wizard replied as he retrieved Godric Gryffindor’s ancient hat.

Harry placed it on his head and smiled at the long forgotten voice that whispered in his ear.

“Ah, Harry Potter, back again are you? I see you’re in the guise of James Baker, but that makes no matter. Do you wish to be placed in Gryffindor again or shall we try Slytherin?”

Gryffindor, please. Harry thought with a grin. *It’s rather refreshing that you haven’t changed your mind.*

“It’s true that I still think you’d do wonderfully well in Slytherin, but as you requested I’ll have to say: **GRYFFINDOR!**”

Harry was slightly upset that his housemates weren’t clapping for him, but he knew those days had passed. With a smile he handed the hat back to the headmaster. “As you always said, it’s our choices that matter.”

Dumbledore smiled at him and the twinkles in his eyes brightened slightly. “Quite different without your house to welcome you, wasn’t it?”

Harry shrugged. “A minor disappointment, but that was a while ago,” he said with a slight grin. “I should be off to square things away here seeing as my *wife* is expecting me home for tea,” Harry said with a wink. “When is the new Transfiguration teacher due in?”

“Just before the students arrive,” Albus said with a smile. “A few minor preparations had to be dealt with before joining us. I’ll introduce the new professor at the welcoming feast.”

Harry nodded, recognizing the finality of his last sentence and excused himself. He spent the rest of the day examining previous syllabi of the various professors who held this position and smirked at two of them. Harry worked over the next few days on his own syllabus and studied the material he was covering as extensively as time would allow.

“You’ve been studying that book for the past three hours, Harry,” Tonks said with a smile. “Why don’t we go to the Broomsticks for a quick bite and a butterbeer or two?”

Harry rubbed his eyes and smiled at his partner. "Sounds like a good plan. I need to go over this when we get back though, not many more days before classes begin and I need to be prepared. Any luck while you were out?"

"Nothing overly suspicious," she said with a shrug. "But we've got some time to keep an eye out."

Harry nodded and they were soon enjoying another meal at their favorite pub. Madam Rosmerta had begun to recognize them and the dishes they ordered since they'd started eating their meals there. When the couple entered, the owner smiled and had their orders ready.

"How did you know?" Harry asked with a wry grin. "Did you study divination when you were in school?"

Madam Rosmerta snorted as she set the bowls of stew in front of them. "I'm glad I did before Trelawney started teaching," she said with a smile. Harry chuckled in reply and the hostess left for another table.

The meal went well with no new or wanted faces spotted during the evening. They were home early and Harry spent the weekend refreshing his memory with the various texts that he'd used himself at one point or another. The Hogwarts Express pulled into Hogsmeade station later that night and Harry Flooed to his office.

A few moments later, there was a curt knock at the door. "Come in," he said from his desk, shuffling a few last bits of paperwork into their proper cubicles. He looked up to find a sneering Severus Snape at the door. "Ah, hello, Severus is it?" he said, pretending he didn't know the man.

"The students are set to arrive any moment and I do suggest you head towards the Great Hall." He turned dramatically and swooped down the hall like a giant bat.

"Always with the theatrics," Harry muttered to himself as he left for the welcoming feast.

He entered through the professor's entrance at the back of the hall and found the whole feeling a bit surreal for his tastes. He glanced down the table to see several familiar faces, several empty chairs, and a smiling headmaster who motioned to the seat on his left. Harry took it with a smile.

"Are you ready for the new term, Professor Baker?" Professor Flitwick said with an enthusiastic energy a few chairs down.

"I can honestly say that I'm not," Harry replied with a smile. "I've never been on the professor's side of the room before."

"It's quite a rewarding job, as I'm sure you'll soon discover," the diminutive man said in his familiar, excited, squeaky voice.

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry replied as the students began filing into the room. He watched a few that he recognized take the same seats they had during their second and first years. He glanced down the table to where he, Ron, and Hermione sat religiously for five years and the smile that was on his face dissolved. It wasn't long until the students were seated and Professor McGonagall walked in with the stool and sorting hat in hand followed by the new first years.

The hat sang its song and Harry clapped vigorously when it ended. Soon, the first years were being sorted and he tried to clap as politely as he could for each student but seemed to be a bit more enthusiastic for those sorted to Gryffindor. With the sorting complete and the students seated, Professor Dumbledore stood and began his customary speech.

"Welcome, welcome to another year at Hogwarts," he said happily. "Before we begin our feast, I'd like to remind you that the Forbidden Forest is strictly that, forbidden. No student is permitted entrance without the guidance and protection of one of the professors or staff. Mr. Filch has asked me to once again remind you that several new items have been added to the banned list, you can find the items at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes and the list on Mr. Filch's office door.

"This year, I'd like to introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Professor Baker." He motioned to Harry who stood and bowed to the polite applause of the students. "Please show him

the same respect you have for our other professors. I would also like to introduce our new Transfiguration teacher.” He motioned in the other direction. “Professor Granger has just taken the position, I’m sure most of you are aware who she is, please show her the respect she deserves as well.” He smiled at the assembled students who were still clapping for the new professors and raised his hands. “With that said, please, tuck in!”

Harry couldn't help but smile at the news that Hermione had taken the position but had to wonder how it affected her. He glanced down the table and nodded when she looked his way. She smiled slightly then went to her food. *I'll have to introduce myself*, he thought after a moment, *but I think it should wait until after the students leave.*

The welcoming feast went just as it had for the past several years, barring the interruptions that Voldemort and his entourage caused from time to time, and soon the students were singing the school song with the headmaster leading the way.

They were dismissed to their dormitories and the students began shuffling out into the hall. Harry checked to see that Hermione was still seated and he steeled his nerves as he stepped up to her.

"I'm sorry we didn't meet at the first professors' meeting... James Baker, Defense Against the Dark Arts." He held out his hand and she took it with a slight smile.

"Hermione Granger, but you knew that," she said with a slight laugh. Harry grinned that the twinkles in her eyes seemed to have returned.

"I look forward to working with you," he said with another smile. "I must head home to the wife, but it was an honor meeting you."

"Likewise," Hermione said with a grin. "Good luck with your classes."

"Good luck to you as well," Harry said with a returned smile and helped her from her chair. He left afterwards and after a quick spin through the Floo Network smiled at the sight before him.

"I missed this stuff so much," Tonks said at the table in their sitting room. Harry laughed and joined her at her own personal feast. The smile on his face grew and Tonks knew he was excited about something. "Good news?" she asked with a smile.

"Hermione took the position at Hogwarts!" he said happily with a slap on the table. "I could tell that she was excited and, most importantly, happy to be there!"

"I hate to spoil your news, but Hedwig dropped this off for you," she said with a smile and handed him a piece of parchment.

Harry wasted no time unrolling the paper and began reading.

Dear Harry,
I thought over what you told me today and I'm sorry that I reacted so negatively towards you. I could see how lonely you'd gotten at school but Ron had convinced me that you were worried about facing Voldemort, I had no idea what you were really going through. I told Ron that I was going to take the Transfiguration Professor position at Hogwarts and he blew up at me again. He said that I should have talked to him before making such a decision and accused me of not respecting his father for securing the job I had in the Ministry. I tried to explain to him how it would help with medical expenses and that I'd be paid more but he would have none of it. After he stormed out on me again, I visited my parents and, because of you, we are on the road to recovery. I'm still slightly angry that you went behind my back but you've given me my parents again and for that I can only thank you and ask for you to forgive me. After I talked with them, I spoke with Molly and Ginny to find that Ron had been lying about certain things to them as well and then giving me more false information about what was happening. I wish I had seen how controlling he was but I'm glad I found out before we went farther than we had. As of this letter, Ron and I are through and I'll be living at Hogwarts from now on, if you can forgive me, I'll be happy to send you my timetable and maybe we could be friends again? I don't know if I'm ready for another relationship right now, I'm sorry if that may hurt you, but I need some time on my own, to be independent again and not rely on having a significant other. I hope you can understand that and someday I'll be ready to date again, but for now I can only offer friendship and hope that you will forgive me. I hope to hear from you soon.
Love from
Hermione

Harry wiped the tears from his eyes as he reread the letter. He looked to Tonks and smiled. "She left him," he said quietly. "She doesn't want to be with me, but she left Ron."

"That's a step in the right direction, Harry," Tonks said with a smile and a pat on the arm.

Harry smiled and looked up quickly. "I should reply!"

Tonks laughed as Harry rushed to his desk and quickly scribbled a note.

Hermione,

I understand that you're not ready for a new relationship right now and that you need friends. You don't have to apologize for being angry with me. I had a feeling you might react that way and there is no reason for you to apologize for it. I'm very happy that you and your parents are talking again; you know my stance on that. With Madam Pomfrey to help you, your medical problems will be a thing of the past!

I'm so excited that you've chosen to be a professor, I knew you would fit the role perfectly, that or working in a library (I'm teasing). That's very good news and I'm happy you've made that decision! I would like to apologize for blowing up at you the other day. I know it was unfair of me to dump everything on you when you had your own problems. I'm sorry that things went the way they did with Ron, if there is anything I can do, let me know. Of course you can send your timetable, if you'll have me back in your life, I'd be more than willing to try being friends again. I've missed the woman that I fell in love with. I know it's not what you want right now, just know that there is someone out there that does love you for who you are. I hope to see you soon and I'll send my timetable when I get yours, my assignment is rather demanding.

*Love,
Harry*

He wasted no time sending Hedwig off with his reply and it was a happy man that sat at the sitting room table with his friend and partner.

"Things are looking up, eh, Harry?" she asked with a smile.

"I'm just glad that she's taking control of her life again," he beamed in reply. Harry reached for a pastry, but Tonks slapped his hand away.

"You get this at the castle all the time! Let me enjoy this!" she said with a grin.

Harry laughed and shook his head. "I should double check that everything's ready for classes tomorrow," he said after clearing his throat. "I've got patrol Monday and Wednesday nights, but I'll be home for lunch." He bent and kissed her cheek as she merrily chewed on the pastry that Harry had attempted to swipe. "I'll be upstairs if you need anything."

A few hours later, Harry was gently prodded awake by Hedwig; apparently he'd fallen asleep at his desk sometime after reviewing his lecture notes. He blinked at the snowy white owl sleepily and smiled. "Sorry, Hedwig," he said hoarsely. She stuck her foot out gracefully and Harry smiled. "You're the most wonderful owl a boy could have!" he said happily as he untied the letter. If owls blushed, Hedwig would be crimson from head to toe as she playfully nipped at his finger. Harry laughed and stroked her head before offering her an owl treat but she seemed flustered, for an owl, and flew to her perch without taking the offered confection.

Harry shook his head and chuckled as he unrolled the letter.

Dear Harry,
Thank you for replying so quickly! After I told you to go away, I didn't think I'd hear from you again. I'm so glad that you're not angry with me. Don't apologize for what you said, Harry. True, it was hurtful, but the truth does hurt, doesn't it? You'll find my timetable attached and I hope you can stop by for a visit on the weekends. Hogwarts hasn't changed much; they've got another Defense Against the Dark Arts professor... It seems the yearly curse is still in effect. I'm not sure what to make of him yet, he seems nice enough from his introduction. I hope he's not as bad as Lockhart or Umbridge! Ron's been trying to get us back together and I caught him in a lie! Can you believe it?! He lied while trying to make up! I was so blind and stupid! I can't believe that I let him manipulate me like that... I lost such a wonderful friend because I believed his deceit. I'm glad we

have this chance, Harry, I really do!
Until your next letter,
Love
Hermione from

Harry examined her timetable and quickly compared it to his. He smiled as he realized their classes coincided every day but Friday and the two of them shared patrol duties. He laughed at his luck and quickly scribbled his reply, attached a copy of his timetable – with extended blocks here and there to make it look different – and sent it off with Hedwig, who seemed rather pleased to deliver the note for him.

He glanced over his lecture material once more to make sure that everything was set for his first class the following morning then readied himself for bed. He'd grown used to sleeping in his various identities and he figured this one would be no different. Slipping into a pair of pajama bottoms, he looked to the clock to gauge how late it was.

"It's only eleven?" He grimaced and shook his head as he left in search of Tonks. *I shouldn't be this tired this early...* he thought to himself and stifled a chuckle at his sleeping partner. The food had been cleared from the table and he smiled as he cradled her in his arms to carry her to the bedroom.

"Wha?" she asked sleepily as Harry began to strip her clothes from her. "I'm too full and sleepy, Harry," she said with a yawn, swatting at his hand as he tried to unlatch her bra.

"I'm *James*, your *husband*," Harry scolded her playfully. "You fell asleep in the sitting room and I was helping you get into your night clothes." He kissed her on the forehead and smiled. "But seeing as you're somewhat awake now, I think you can handle the rest of it?"

Tonks grinned after she'd woken enough and slapped his rear as he passed her on his journey to his side of the bed. "You were enjoying yourself, I know that grin, *dear*," she said playfully.

Harry laughed. He was in a great mood, but didn't really feel up to the task Tonks was hinting at. "I need to get some sleep tonight but we can christen the house next weekend," he teased with a wink.

She laughed as she slipped into her nighty and the two of them slid under the covers. "I'm glad that you're finally getting out of that funk you've been in, Harry," Tonks said with a kiss as she snuggled beside him, wrapping an arm around his stomach. "Things will get better... they've already started."

Harry yawned and slowly caressed her arm as they both began drifting to sleep. "I hope they do, Mary," he said with a slight chuckle as she pinched him.

"It's Marion, dear, or honey, but you may call me love if you wish," she mumbled sleepily, her eyes already closed.

Harry glanced at her in surprise. *Love?* he asked himself as visions of Hermione flooded his mind. "Goodnight, honey," he said as she snuggled into his side. Harry smiled and slowly drifted to sleep with visions of Hermione dancing through his dreams.

Morning came unexpectedly late as Harry Potter, then known as James Baker, strolled happily from his office's fireplace to his new desk. Classes weren't to begin for another two hours, but he'd already eaten breakfast with his wife, reviewed the students in his advanced classes for seventh year, and smiled evilly as he reviewed his introduction speech.

The clock seemed to have noticed the air of eagerness that surrounded him and he smiled as the bell rang, signaling the start of his day.

"First class is seventh years," Harry said under his breath as he collected the proper supplies he'd need. He glanced at the roster and noted that there were only half a dozen or so students taking the advanced seventh year courses. He looked to his clock again and smiled as he pulled his invisibility cloak over his head then stepped into the classroom.

Nobody noticed the door slowly creek open and he watched as the students took their seats as they had done the previous six years. There were noticeable gaps, but with so few in his class he expected as much. *That's going to change...* he thought as he made his way to the classroom's entrance. Harry stepped into the hall after a headcount and with a quick glance around, pulled off his cloak and tucked it into his robes. He waited another moment before slamming the door open and trudging purposefully to the front of the room.

With a flourish, he spun around and glared at the assembled students. "You are here to learn the sometimes brutal art and inexact science of defense against the dark arts," he began. Borrowing the tone of both his previous professors, he spoke barely above a whisper. "Wand waving is not foolish as this is *real* magic. I will teach you how to fight the bewitching of your mind and the ensnaring of your senses. I can teach you how to stop flame, eschew a shield of glory... even put a stop to untimely death."

He glanced around at the startled looks on the student's faces. They didn't seem to know how to react to his introduction and he was barely able to contain the laughter that was bubbling in his mind. "Mr. Creevey!" he barked suddenly. Dennis Creevey was still slightly shorter than average and he jumped when his name was called.

"Y-yes, sir?" he replied tentatively.

"What is the best way to avoid... this:" Harry had his wand out of his robes faster than anyone could see and shouted "**STUPEFY!**" The tell-tale red light of the stunning spell flew from the tip of his wand and struck the small young man dead in the chest and he slumped over at his desk.

"S-Sir, you just stunned Dennis," a petite girl said in a shocked voice from the middle of the classroom.

Harry shook his head and cast an energizing spell on the unconscious young man. "I believe there is an old Auror who used the term **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" Harry bellowed, causing them all to jump in their seats once again. He smiled after his back was to them then calmed quickly.

“Miss MacDonald, I did stun Mr. Creevey, but only to prove a point,” Harry said with a nod to the young woman. “You are all in an advanced class!” he said sternly. “I expect good things from you during your final year at Hogwarts and I’ll be brutally honest with you when I say that you will have as much homework, if not more, than you’ve seen since you’ve started attending this school. Yes, Miss Branstone?”

“More homework than we’ve ever seen, sir?” she asked timidly.

Harry nodded solemnly. “That is correct. This is the year of your N.E.W.T.s and I expect you to pass them and pass them spectacularly.” He retrieved several sheets of parchment and looked around at the students. “Now, we’re going to be doing quite a bit this year and having you spread about is going to be a nuisance. If you would move to the front of the room, one student per desk will be fine...”

He waited patiently as each student grudgingly relocated to the front row of desks then smiled genuinely. “Good, now I can keep a better watch on you and you’ll be able to hear me.” Harry handed the parchment to Dennis and clapped him on the shoulder. “Sorry for stunning you, Mr. Creevey, be ready if it happens again. Now take a sheet and pass it to the person next to you.”

Harry waited patiently again as his orders were followed and with a satisfactory nod turned towards the blackboard. “You were introduced to me during the welcoming feast, so I assume you know my name. In any case, here is my information if you need to contact me.” He quickly scribbled the information on the board’s black surface. “You’ll notice that I’ve given extra hours after classes have finished for additional instruction. These are optional, though I highly recommend you attend them. You’ll see the assignments have been planned for the entire year,” he continued after turning around. “I expect each assignment turned in on time, *without exception!* Your house will lose points for each day the assignment is overdue.

“We will also be working closely with the Care of Magical Creatures professor. You will be attending his class instead of this one on the dates indicated. There are many forms of the dark arts that utilize the

creatures Professor Hagrid will discuss with you.” Harry sat on the edge of his desk and silently made eye-contact with each of the students as he had been throughout his introduction. “There will be a large amount of practical work involved in this course due, in part, to a dueling club. Attendance is mandatory and will be conducted Wednesdays after tea. Detentions are not exempt from this portion of the instruction! Contact me if there are any problems involved.

“As you can see, your first assignment is due within the week. You may finish it ahead of time if you choose. This goes for all assignments. If you finish them early and they score high enough, you will earn points for your house.” He paused to let the information sink in then looked at each student once again. “Do you have any questions? Yes, Mr. Whitby?”

“Sir, will you be casting hexes at us each day?” the young, well built Hufflepuff asked.

“I may and I may not, you will not know until it happens.” He smiled slightly, anticipating the next question. “I will not use the unforgivables,” he said reassuringly. “But all legal hexes are fair game. Your N.E.W.T.s may test your knowledge on anything you have learned from year one through year seven. Be sure you have your counter-curses memorized. Yes, Miss Quirke?”

“Sir, there is quite a lot of time scheduled for coursework, won’t this interfere with our other classes?”

“That is up to you,” he said with a smile. “There is a library and weekends, not to mention holidays. This is an advanced class, and I expect you to work hard if you wish to succeed here. I have given you the opportunity to turn in assignments ahead of time so it would be wise to work out the essays and assigned reading when you can. No further questions? Then we’ll begin with the theory portion of our class.”

The instruction went blissfully well for Harry. The students were all attentive and took notes like mad. He admired their initial sense of responsibility and willingness to work hard. When the bell signaled the end of the hour, he looked at everyone, who was still seated, and grinned.

“Five points to each of your houses for an excellent first day. For extra credit, hand in a two foot essay on the uses, defenses, and detection of stunning charms next class. You are dismissed.” He watched as each student retrieved their books and exited the room quietly, not a grumble among them.

The hours slipped by until lunch arrived and he made the trip back to the house. Tonks was napping happily on the sofa, a book resting in her lap and Harry grinned at the sight. He tiptoed to her slumbering form and kissed her tenderly. Tonks woke with a start, her wand at his throat, cursing at his mischievous grin.

“Bloody hell!” she growled at him as she pushed him away. “You gave me a heart attack, you git!”

Harry laughed and ruffled her pink hair. “You should be Marion all the time, dear.” He chastised with a wide smile. “You never know when a frisky husband may be home for lunch!”

Despite the fright he’d just given her, Tonks couldn’t stay angry with him. She shook her head as her short, pink hair grew into a long, auburn braided ponytail. She looked up to him, not with her previously mismatched eye color, but with two serenely hazel pools that could steal the breath away from any man who looked into them. “Better?” she asked with a smirk as she stood and her body readjusted to her undercover identity.

“You know I find you adorable no matter what you wear on what body you’ve attained,” he said with a kiss to her cheek. She smiled and pulled him into a hug as their lunch magically appeared on the sitting room’s table. “I’ve got rounds tonight so I’ll be having tea at the school,” he said as they sat for their mid-day meal.

“No letters today,” she said around a spoonful of stew she was blowing on to cool it down.

“She’s probably swamped with work,” Harry said with a shrug. “When she’s ready for visits, she’ll owl me an invitation.” Reaching for his second helping of bread, he attempted to change the subject. “Anything new today?” he asked nonchalantly.

"No news yet," she said with a dismissive wave. "I visited the market for some wine, just your same old patrons running around."

"I wonder if we'll see anything. Kingsley seemed pretty sure that he'd show up here at one point or another..." Harry said absently as he glanced at the clock. He pushed his empty plate away and stood to leave. "I should get back to work," he said with a smile. He bent and kissed her lightly before turning back to the fireplace.

"What time will you be home today?" Tonks asked as she finished off her pumpkin juice.

"Snape takes over at midnight so shortly after then," he replied as he threw a pinch of powder into the flames. "Don't wait up! Get your rest; doctor's orders and all that."

Tonks waved to him as he stepped into the flames and the next moment he was sitting at his desk scribbling notes for his third years that were due the period after lunch. There was a soft knock on his door just after he'd pulled the roster for the next class. "Come in," he said loudly enough for the person outside to hear. The door creaked open and Harry looked up then smiled at his unexpected guest.

"Professor Granger, what a pleasant surprise," he said after rising from his seat. He offered her the empty chair next to his desk and she took it with a slight smile. "What brings you by?"

"Please, call me Hermione when students aren't around," she said with a slight smile.

"You may call me James," he said with a smile of his own.

Hermione nodded and cleared her throat. "I reviewed your file, to get a bit of a background on you since we're sharing the first patrol tonight," she said nervously. "I hope you're not upset with me for doing that."

"Not at all," he said with a smile. "I understand, seeing as I teach from the Alastor Moody school of thought, at least in part," he said with a grin.

She let out a small sigh of relief and smiled a bit more warmly. "I hope you don't mind my forwardness, but I noticed that you taught Muggle physical education at one point?"

Harry nodded with the smile still on his face. "For a few years," he admitted.

"I've gone through a rough period in my life and I was hoping that you might consider helping me get back into shape?" She looked at him hopefully. "I unwittingly let myself go and I need a bit of a self-esteem booster," she admitted. "I don't think I need much time out of your timetable, I've read a good deal on fitness and exercise, and it suggested that you have a training partner or instructor to help decrease the risk of injury."

He thought for a few moments and nodded. "If you're not too embarrassed, I'm offering fitness training for my students after tea, mainly for the sixth and seventh years for those who wish to become Aurors. Good physical condition is an asset in that field and I'd be happy to offer this service to professors as well."

Hermione nodded. "I was hoping it could be more private. I don't feel comfortable showcasing myself right now."

Harry thought again. "Well, how about I speak with Madam Pomfrey and the house-elves and set up a training diet for you. For the physical activity portion, I think twenty laps walking around the pitch each morning or a lap around the lake for the first two weeks." He smiled as her eyes lit up. "It will be quiet at that time with most of the students still asleep and should give you time to think and work things out."

"So, just twenty laps around the pitch each day?" she asked with her shoulders raised just a bit higher and sitting slightly straighter.

Harry nodded. "To start, after the first two weeks, I'll join you on a jog to gauge how well your body is reacting to the increased exercise. We'll determine where you go from there. Though, if you wish to lose weight, you'll need to cut the pumpkin juice down to two glasses a day with two glasses of water at every meal and one glass in the morning and in the evening. Breads and other high carbohydrate

foods will be cut to allow proteins to build your muscle.” He smiled reassuringly when she frowned a bit. “Everyone loves their bread and pasta, but it’s necessary to start and you can increase your servings after you get into your routine.”

Hermione smiled and looked at the clock. “I should get back to class.” Harry stood as she did and he showed her out. “Thank you for helping me,” she said with a smile.

“Anytime, my door is always open,” Harry said with a grin. He watched Hermione leave the classroom and turned back to his roster. He was deliriously happy that he was able to help her and he smiled as the bell rang to signal the start of classes once again.

The day flew by in theatrical swirls of his cape and his new speech that had yet to make anyone even grin in the slightest. He attributed it to the students not knowing what to make of him and he liked the effect it had when they diligently paid attention in class. He’d only had to take a handful of points from Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Slytherin for talking in class but he felt he made a good first impression on the initial batch of students he’d had that day.

Evening rolled around and he was soon in the Great Hall with everyone else for his second meal as a member of the professor’s table. He checked with Hermione to make sure her meal was satisfactory and she smiled her thanks for not cutting her favorite foods out completely.

“Now keep in mind that one serving is all you’re allowed, but I made sure that the house-elves gradually reduce the serving size until we reach the proper amount.” He took a sip of his water before continuing. “I’ve spoken with Madam Pomfrey and she’s agreed to help you weigh and measure yourself each week in addition to keeping track of your vitals. After tea, you should visit her to begin your log, and tomorrow will be your first walk. My wife and I will join you in the morning seeing as we should keep our exercise levels maintained as well. Besides, it’s not easy changing your lifestyle by yourself.”

Hermione laughed. “I read about that as well. I was thinking about asking my friend Harry if he’d help, but his timetable is packed.”

“Harry Potter?” he asked with a nod. “That’s right... you, he, and Ron Weasley were friends in school.”

“We were, but if you don’t mind, please don’t mention Ron’s name again,” Hermione said a touch more evenly than she’d intended to.

Harry nodded solemnly. “Of course...” He looked at his watch and smiled apologetically. “I have to attend my first optional instruction hour, so I’ll see you at nine.”

Hermione nodded and smiled apologetically in return. “I’m sorry for the rudeness, but he’s... how should I say it... an issue that I don’t want to talk about.”

“No apologies necessary, Professor,” Harry said with a slight grin. “Enjoy your tea.” With that, he pushed his chair under the table and left for his classroom. One half-hour later, his entire class of seventh years arrived, ready for their optional training session.

“I’m glad the lot of you decided to attend,” Harry said with a smile. “Tonight will be your first fitness lesson. Madam Pomfrey will arrive momentarily to start your physical education logbooks. Your vitals will be taken, you will be weighed, body fat measured, and several other examinations will be taken to judge your basic fitness level.”

“Why are you teaching us physical education, Professor?” Stewart Ackerley asked in confusion. “What use is that?”

Harry nodded and paced in front of his class. “Imagine that you are in a duel with a strong dark wizard. Now, what happens if he disarms you?” He smiled at the looks he received for his obvious question. “How many of you are working towards Auror training?” he asked after a moment. Everyone raised their hands and he smiled proudly. “That is an excellent profession! However, they will work you to the bone, physically, mentally, and at times emotionally as well.

“There will be physical education in the Auror training program you’ll have to complete and it would be well worth your while to be physically fit before you undergo the program.” He smiled and returned to his seat on the edge of his desk. “To answer the previous scenario, you do anything within your power to survive, if that means

roughing your opponent up with your fists, I'm sure that will be the choice you take. If it means running away, it would be nice if you could run more than a few meters without collapsing."

There was a knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey entered the room with a supply of books in tow, hovering quietly behind her. "Are they ready, Professor?" she asked with a smile. Harry nodded and waved his wand. "Men on one side, women on the other," he ordered as a barrier appeared and spliced the room in half, each side containing several cubicles for changing and private examination. "There's an anti-peeping charm on the barrier. It would be wise not to test it."

The students did as they were told and they were all relieved that removing all of their clothes was not necessary. Madam Pomfrey bustled from student to student, doing her work efficiently and rapidly. Within thirty minutes, the barrier had been removed and everyone seated at their desks with a new book.

"You are in charge of keeping your workbooks in order. They will magically keep track of the times and number of hours that you spend working on your routines," Harry said with a smile. "You will all be placed on training diets as well, and I'll make sure that a certain number of sweets and butterbeers are allowed so you don't go spare during this portion of your instruction."

"From tomorrow until you finish schooling here, you will spend time walking, running, and weight training. General calisthenics will be an active part of your lives and believe me, you'll be thankful once you take your first physical test in Auror training." He was impressed with this group of students, the same ones he'd gone to school with, and smiled proudly at them. "That's all for tonight. I've seen your timetables and have worked your routines around them. It will only be thirty minutes during the day and we'll begin additional practical and theory tomorrow evening. You're dismissed."

Harry returned to his office and set to work on the next day's class load, Tuesdays and Thursdays were his busiest and he needed to be ready. Another knock came at his door and he glanced at the clock before inviting his visitor in.

“Hermione, I see it’s nine already, let me put these papers away and we can start our patrol.” He smiled at her and after a few moments of straightening up, joined her as they began walking the corridors.

“I think I’m going to need a map for this place!” he exclaimed as they turned down another corridor he pretended to be surprised to find.

Hermione snorted a soft laugh at a private joke he knew about and she opened yet another broom closet. “You’ll get used to the changing rooms and shortcuts,” she said after declaring the small room empty of students. “My friends and I spent a lot of time running around these halls not too long ago.” Harry hid a wince when a sad look crossed her face and she turned from him.

“They must have been good friends,” he said whimsically. “I had a few like that when I was in school, but it didn’t last.”

“We grew apart as well, unfortunately, but things are looking up,” she said with a sad smile on her face.

They continued the rest of their shift with small talk about their classes and Hermione laughed at the amount of homework Harry had given the students in seventh and fifth years. “If my friends had been subject to that, they would have gone mad!” she said with another snort of laughter. “Harry would be frustrated and ask me to help him, the other one would have asked to copy mine.” He noted the distaste she added to her description of Ron and inwardly cringed again. He wasn’t quite over the loss of Ron’s friendship and he had hoped there still was a chance to repair things between them. But after his treatment of Hermione, Harry decided that Ron was no longer a person he’d want to ever call a friend again.

Harry and Hermione met with Professors Snape and Flitwick at the designated time and place then bid each other a goodnight before the tapestry that hid Hermione's quarters.

Harry Flooed home shortly afterwards and found Tonks asleep on the sofa once again. Thankfully, she was disguised this time and with a slight smile, he tried to gently shake her awake. She didn't stir at his attempt so he lifted her in his arms, as he had the previous night, and carried her upstairs.

"Hmm?" she groaned as he laid her on the bed. "Oh, *James*, you're home," she said with a sleepy smile.

"I said you didn't have to wait up for me," he said with a grin. "Why don't we get ready for bed?"

Tonks slipped to the floor and undressed as he stripped to his boxers. He shook his head as they snuggled under the covers and felt her warm, nude body pressed against his.

"How was your day?" Tonks purred into his ear. She flicked his earlobe with her tongue before kissing him gently at the base of his jaw.

He smiled and shifted a bit as he felt her tug at the waistband of his boxers. "I thought you were sleepy..." he said with a smile as her foot hooked his underwear and removed them completely.

"I was waiting for you to carry me to bed again," she said with a soft chuckle. "Don't you want to explore our new bodies, we are married after all," she cooed seductively in his ear.

Harry laughed as she rolled on top of him then bent down for a kiss and after a few moments, he gave into her demands.

"You should have asked me, *James*!" Tonks grumbled irritatingly as they walked across the school grounds to the Quidditch pitch. "Did

you stop to think that I might have wanted to sleep in after last night?!"

Harry cringed at the response he'd been getting since he told his partner that both of them would meet Hermione for her first walk. "Why is this such a big deal?" he asked seemingly for the hundredth time. "You care for Hermione as well... don't you want to help her?"

"Of course I do," she said quietly. "I just wish you would have talked to me about it first."

"I'm sorry," he said, stopping and holding her at arms length. "It slipped out last night at tea. If you don't want to go, you don't have to." He smiled softly and she rolled her eyes with a sigh of resignation.

"Come on, it's only a twenty-lap walk," she huffed and turned towards the pitch but Harry turned her back.

"Can we not be fighting when we get there, please?" he asked pleadingly, cupping her cheek with his hand. "We're helping a friend and it'll only be this one time. I'd like you to be there to help me as well," he whispered. "It's not easy hiding from her, but I'm a professor here and I'm also her friend. I can't turn her away."

Tonks closed her eyes when he'd placed his warm hand on her cheek and she nodded after he was finished, covering his hand with her chilled fingers. "I'm sorry, I'm just tired," she said quietly. "Come on, Hermione's waiting for her coach."

Harry smiled softly and kissed her gently on the forehead. "Thank you," he whispered as he pulled away. They continued the remainder of the hike hand-in-hand and Harry waved to Hermione after she came into view.

"Good morning!" Hermione said with a smile. "I got here a bit earlier than I thought!"

"Professor Granger, this is my wife Marion. Marion, Professor Hermione Granger," Harry said with a smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet the famous Hermione Granger," Tonks said with a smile. "Is everything they've written in the books true?"

Hermione laughed as she shook Tonks' hand. "I don't think all of it's true," she said with a smile, "at least not what they've written in the Daily Prophet's gossip columns!"

The three of them laughed for a moment as they began their stretching exercises. Harry and Tonks took turns correcting Hermione's form throughout the process and were soon walking at a semi-brisk pace around the pitch. They didn't say much during their early morning exercises and they parted ways after Harry checked her heart rate.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Harry asked with a smile. "If it's alright with you, I can tend to her training alone," he said as they walked back to Hogsmeade.

"I thought you were just going to walk today and again in two weeks?" Tonks asked a bit evenly.

Harry looked at her curiously. "Are you alright?" he asked after taking her arm. "I just want to help her along, you know exercise is better when you've got company."

"I know," she said after a moment. "But if you keep spreading yourself so thin, I'll be the only one on the lookout."

Harry shook his head and smiled. "I'll just catch a nap over lunch and do more night work when I don't have patrol at the castle. When Hogsmeade trips start, I'll be with the students and can keep watch then as well."

"Just don't spread yourself too thin, Ha... James," Tonks said quietly. "Listen, you're going to be late unless you run back, I'll catch up..."

Harry looked at his watch and blanched. "Better yet, I'll apparate to the house!" He kissed her on the cheek and with a pop was standing in their bedroom. *Good thing we can travel like that...* he thought to himself as he barreled through the bathroom to the shower.

He'd just finished getting ready when Tonks walked in looking rather deep in thought. "I'm off. I'll see you for lunch," he said with a smile and another kiss to her cheek. She looked up at him, confused for a moment, then smiled and kissed him back.

"See you then," she said. Harry looked at her curiously but had to rush to the fireplace.

Classes went well for his second day and the sixth years were just as surprised as the seventh years were. It was a tired man that stumbled into his house at noon and with a groan collapsed on the sofa.

"Hey, ready for some lunch?" Tonks asked with a curious smile from the table.

Harry shook his head. "I'm too tired," he mumbled. Harry sighed when he felt fingers slip into his hair and he moaned sleepily. "Can you wake me up in an hour?" he asked groggily.

Harry felt a kiss on his lips which he returned weakly. "Get some sleep, I'll wake you," Tonks whispered into his ear before everything went dark.

"James... James, wake up..." Tonks whispered into his ear at the designated time. "You've got to get back to the school."

Harry's eyes fluttered open and he still didn't feel rested. "I think it's going to take some time to get used to this timetable," Harry said with a yawn. He smiled at the woman sitting next to him. "Thanks for waking me."

"You asked me to wake you after an hour and here we are," she said with a smile. "Off to class with you! I'll see you when you're done with rounds." She kissed him lightly on the cheek and straightened his hair a bit.

"You take good care of me," he said with a smile, rising to his feet. He pulled her hand to his lips and with a kiss to her knuckles waved and Flooed back to his office. He hadn't been there long when a knock came at his door. "Come in."

He hadn't looked up from his lesson plan but turned when he heard Hermione clear her throat by the door.

"Oh, Hermione, sit down, please." He grinned at her. "How are you feeling after your first day on the program?"

"Tired," she admitted with a smile. "But I'll get used to it."

"Any soreness or other problems?"

She shook her head. "Nothing yet, though I have a feeling I'll be running into that problem in the morning."

Harry laughed. "Well, yes, there is that problem," he admitted. "If you'd like, I can continue training with you in the mornings, exercise loves company."

"Actually, I was going to ask my friend Harry to join me," she said with a slight smile. "I've been ignoring him since I told him I was teaching here. He's an Auror now so he's used to the exercise."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to hear from you then," Harry said with a grin as he turned back to his paperwork. "Is there anything else you needed?" he asked as he looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"I just wanted to thank you for helping me," she said with a smile. "And I was hoping I could cook for you and your wife this weekend, it's the least I can do to repay you for your kindness."

"That would be wonderful," he said, returning her smile in full. "I have to check with Marion first, but I think there shouldn't be any problems. I'll let you know after I get her word?"

"That'll be fine," Hermione said as she stood to leave. "Thanks again, you don't know how much this means to me."

"Seeing you physically fit and cheerful is enough," Harry said with another smile. "I'll see you at tea."

She waved before leaving his office and Harry returned to his preparations. The day slipped by and ten minutes before tea, he

found himself on all fours with his head in the fireplace looking confusedly at an angry woman.

"Marion, why are you so angry?" Harry asked dumbfounded. "It's just one meal as thanks for helping her."

"What if she finds out? What if our cover is blown?" Tonks said in exasperation. "She's one clever witch and it wouldn't be too hard for her to figure things out!"

"She might be able to if we act like who we are," he said as he stepped from the fireplace. "The only one who'd give us away is Hedwig and I'll have her stay at the castle... All of our stuff is generic enough that nobody will know; it's not like everything is embroidered with HP and NT!" he said a little heatedly. "What's gotten into you, *Marion*? She's a friend of ours, one we've helped and who wants to thank us with a simple meal." Tonks looked at him crossly. "Wasn't it you who told me to tell her how I felt and to visit her? She thinks that I'm James Baker, a professor at Hogwarts who's helped get her life back on track and is happily married to Marion Baker."

"*I know*," she said with a frustrated sigh. "I get that..."

"Then what's the problem?" he asked and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'll sweep the house and make sure that all of our official equipment is at my place, she doesn't know where that is so it'll be safe. We'll be James and Marion Baker, husband and wife, and we won't have to worry about Hermione blowing our cover." He cupped her cheek and smiled. "I'll take you out Sunday night. Anywhere you choose if that helps."

Tonks rolled her eyes and a slight smile spread across her face. "You don't have to do that..." she said after sliding her arms around his neck. "But I'm not letting you back away from it now!"

Harry laughed and pulled her into a hug. "So is it ok? Are we ok?"

Tonks kissed him tenderly on his lips and slid back afterwards with a wide smile caressing her face. "We're ok," she said quietly. "Tell Hermione it's fine and we'll see her Saturday."

Harry grinned and kissed her again. "Thanks," he said happily. "I should get to tea before it's over."

"See you tonight, dear," Tonks said with a cheeky smile and Harry laughed just before the green flames engulfed him. He barely made it to the Great Hall in time and gave Hermione the affirmative before heading off to his extra-curricular class. His clock chimed that it was time to begin rounds and with a tired stretch, he opened the door to see Hermione walking into the classroom.

"Be right there," he said with a wave as he secured his office. She leaned against the wall and he joined her after a few moments. "How were classes today?" he asked absently as they started their walk down the corridors.

"They went as well as can be expected," she said with a shrug. "I don't understand how difficult turning a matchstick into a needle is..."

"Well, you've got far more experience than they do," Harry said nonchalantly as he opened a broom closet to find two students doing exactly what they shouldn't be doing.

"Ten points from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw," Harry said sternly as the students looked to the floor. "You know the rules, now back to your houses." They did as they were told and the two professors continued on their patrol.

Conversation slid from one topic to the next. The war, the school, students, current events, just about everything under the sun and before they knew it, Snape and Flitwick were relieving them for the evening.

"That went fast," Harry remarked after they'd started on their way towards the teacher's quarters.

"It was nice chatting with someone for a change," Hermione said with a smile. They stopped at an old tapestry and Hermione smiled again. "I'll see you later," she said with a wave. "Don't keep your wife waiting."

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to do that. Goodnight, Hermione," he said as he continued to his office. He arrived at home at the same time as before and again found Tonks sound asleep on the sofa. She was in her guise as Marion and he thought how lucky it was that his partner was a Metamorphmagus like himself. He kissed her gently on the forehead and cradled her in his arms. She moaned sleepily and wrapped her arms around his neck. A few minutes later, he set her down on the bed and began to undress her.

"Hmm? Oh, you don't have to do that again," she said sleepily.

"Either that or you're grumpy in the morning," Harry said with a smile.

"Oh, this came for you after tea," Tonks said as she rifled through her robe. "Letter from Hermione."

Harry smiled and took the rolled parchment.

Dear Harry,
I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write you again, but I've been busy at the school with classes. The new defense professor is a very nice man named James Baker. He's rather ruthless in classes, but his students seem to be responding well to the way he's teaching. But the reason why I'm writing is to ask if you could do me a small favor. I've started exercising in the mornings and it's thanks to James that I'm able to do this. He's taught Muggle physical education along with Auror training as well. I asked him for help and he's come through brilliantly. I was hoping you'd like to join me in the mornings for a walk around the Quidditch pitch at Hogwarts. It's twenty laps a day for the first two weeks and I was hoping you'd have time with your busy timetable. I checked the copy you sent me before I asked and I hope you'd like to join me. I've got to get ready for patrol now. I hope to hear from you soon! I start my walk at five.
Love from
Hermione

Harry smiled and quickly scribbled that he'd see her at the designated time, rolled the parchment and sent Hedwig off after a lazy stroke of her feathers.

“Hermione just asked if Harry could join her on the walks,” he said with a grin.

“Oh, so you won’t be going there as James then?” Tonks asked with a raised eyebrow. “This could get interesting... Don’t screw up, Harry,” she warned.

Harry nodded. “I don’t intend to screw anything up,” he said seriously as he pulled off his robes. He had stripped down to his boxers and was about to slink under the covers when Tonks shook her head. “Oh, I won’t need these again?” he asked with a lopsided grin and tugged at the waistband of his underwear. Tonks lifted the covers to show that she was in the same situation and Harry laughed as he discarded the unnecessary clothing.

He slipped under the covers and threw them over their heads. A few giggles erupted from Tonks followed shortly thereafter by moans.

Harry realized he was out of shape when he tried to move the next morning. The last few assignments he and his partner had been given were cushy and relaxing, allowing his lapse in physical fitness. He groaned when he realized how stiff his legs were and the soreness in his muscles seemed to reach everywhere. Harry sighed when an enervation charm didn’t help and he groaned again when he walked across the bedroom.

“You’re the one who said you’d do this with her,” Tonks said from under her pillow.

“I know,” Harry said with a grimace as he slipped on a pair of sweat pants and his trainers. “I’ll be back for breakfast,” he whispered as he kissed her shoulder.

“Don’t be late this time,” she said with a smile. “And don’t forget you can apparate home.”

“I won’t forget,” he said with a laugh as he reverted to his Harry Potter persona and disappeared with a pop. Harry looked up at the wrought iron gates that marked the beginning of the school grounds and with a smile, pushed them open so he could follow the path to the

Quidditch pitch. Hermione was walking stiffly from the school by time he'd started stretching and he looked up when she called his name.

"Good morning!" he said with a wave and a smile, hiding the fact that he was sore from head to toe as well.

"I'm glad you said you'd come," Hermione smiled in return. "This is an everyday project for me," she explained as she started her routine of stretches. "James has me on a training diet and hopefully, I'll shed off this excess fat..."

"You're not fat, Hermione," Harry said with a slight chuckle.

"Yes I am," she stated flatly. "I don't feel good about myself, and I need to start somewhere."

Harry nodded and they continued their stretches in silence. When it came to walking, he felt so comfortable with her that he didn't feel the need to talk. Happiness seemed to be found by just being near her and seeing the woman of his dreams spending time with him.

"So, how's your assignment going?" Hermione asked once she'd gotten tired of the silence.

"Nothing yet," Harry said with a shrug. "We're still looking though."

"How's Tonks? Is she doing ok after her tumble?"

"She's getting along well, actually," Harry said with a laugh. "The food is much better in the new place than what we had before and she's in heaven."

Hermione snorted a laugh that turned into an infectious chuckle from Harry. "I'm sorry I didn't ask you to visit sooner..." she said after they'd finished. "I thought we needed to cool down after that last fight."

"Look, about that..." Harry started but Hermione shook her head.

"I know, Harry," she said with a slight smile. "I was just too blind to see it."

"I'm just happy that we can talk again," he said with a sigh. "I've missed you too much."

"Why didn't you reply to the letters I sent?" she asked curiously after a moment.

"With Ron there?" Harry asked incredulously. "That would have gone over well and I said before that I didn't want to be the reason you two broke up."

She seemed to take this as the only answer she'd get and they continued their laps in silence.

"Well, I need to get ready for classes," Hermione announced as they finished their final stretch. "Thank you for coming, Harry," she said once again. "I've really missed spending time with you."

"Me to, Hermione," he said with a quick hug. He was happy to note that she hugged him back and didn't stiffen at his contact. "I should get back and eat breakfast before my shift starts."

"Oh, I'm cooking for James and his wife this Saturday as thanks for helping me," Hermione said rather quickly. "Would you like to join me?"

Harry sighed inwardly at the look of hope in her eyes and smiled apologetically. "I really wish I could but I'm booked solid this weekend." He pulled her into a tight hug and whispered, "I really wish I could, Hermione, maybe we could get together another time for tea?"

She hugged him tightly in return and smiled forcibly. "That's ok, Harry, I understand." She backed away and shrugged. "I thought I'd ask and I'd like that. Let me know when your timetable is free?"

He cupped her cheek with his hand and sighed. "You don't have to hide your feelings from me, Hermione, remember I can still read you just like you can me. Sunday is free, if you'd still like to spend time with me besides your morning walks..."

He brightened when her smile reverted from her fake one to genuine and she nodded. "Sunday will be fine," she said quietly.

"There's someplace I'd like to show you if that's ok with you," he said with a smile. "Can I owl you directions? It's a surprise."

She nodded and Harry noted the sparkles that were starting to form in her eyes. "Sunday it is then, I'll make sure I don't have any duties to attend to. Do you want to make it an all day event?"

"I'll have to check with Tonks and see if she can handle things for a day, but I'd love to," he replied brightly. "I'll let you know if there's a problem."

They hugged again and Harry thought she lingered in the embrace a bit longer than she ever had before. He wanted to stay where he was but she pulled away and started back to the school. With a wave, he began to jog back to the gates.

"I'm going to be late!" he grumbled, looking at his watch. As soon as he was out of the influence of the wards, he apparated back to the house and began to strip his clothes off in a rush.

"You don't have much time!" Tonks called from downstairs as Harry stepped out of the shower. He saw his reflection in the mirror and quickly changed into his other persona before dressing and rushing to the sitting room. "I made you a few sandwiches to eat before class, now hurry up!"

Harry laughed and kissed her on the cheek. "You're a lifesaver!" he said as she blushed. "I'll see you at tea; we have to talk about this weekend!"

"James, fix your hair before you leave," Tonks said in a business-like tone. "I'll see you tonight."

Harry smiled, ran his fingers through his hair as ordered, and within moments, he was flipping through papers as he chewed hungrily on his sandwich. The bell rang just as he'd gotten the papers he needed straight and without hesitation, introduced himself to the class.

The day was busy and raced by rather quickly before he realized it was tea time. With a flurry of papers and a pinch of powder, he was standing in the sitting room looking at a table set for a romantic evening for two.

"What's this?" he asked curiously as he set down his briefcase and hung his cloak.

"It's tea," Tonks said with a smile, setting down a bottle of wine after filling two glasses. "I've been such a prat the past few days that I wanted to apologize," she said sheepishly.

Harry took the offered glass and pulled Tonks into a one-armed hug. "No apology is needed," he said quietly and kissed her cheek. "You've been doing all the surveillance and I've been running around the school, perhaps taking the defense position was a mistake."

Tonks smiled after they clinked their glasses together and took the seat that Harry offered her. After a long pull off her wine, she dished out the food and patted the chair next to her. "You must be famished, have a seat and tell me what you wanted to talk about."

Harry did as he was instructed and smiled when she kissed his cheek after he'd seated himself. "Thank you for cooking," he said as he examined the work she had to have gone through. With a slight turn, he looked at her and smiled. "Hermione invited me along for Saturday," he said with a slight laugh. "I had to turn her down, of course, but offered to spend time with her on Sunday. She asked if we could make it an all day thing and I thought I'd ask you first."

"You don't need my permission to date Hermione, Harry," Tonks said evenly after a moment.

"It isn't a date," Harry said taken back at her choice of words and tone of voice, "and I wanted to make sure it was alright with you because of our assignment, I don't want to keep pushing it all onto your shoulders."

Tonks sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. "It's alright, James, I'll cover for you on Sunday," she said quietly. "You two get to know

each other again, it's been too long since you've had anyone but me to look at."

Harry looked at her strangely for a minute then turned fully towards her so he could see her properly. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked as he took her hands in his. "You're my closest friend and I enjoy spending time with you whether we're working or not."

Tonks continued to look at her plate and nodded. "I know," she said after a moment. She finally looked up at him and smiled. "Come now, your plate's getting cold and you have to get back for your extra-curricular training session."

"Is everything ok?" he asked her quietly.

She nodded and took in a deep breath. "It's fine, James, really." She kissed him on the cheek and nudged him towards his plate. "Now eat some food! I don't want to hear your stomach rumbling all night!"

Harry smiled slightly at her jibe and reluctantly turned towards his plate. "Did you make this?" he asked after a moment. "It doesn't taste like the house-elves made it."

She nodded nervously. "I had one of them help, but mainly to keep from burning the house down," she admitted after a slight laugh.

"This is good," he said with a grin and helped himself to a second serving, "very good!"

Her smile grew rather broad as Harry dug into a third helping. The clock signaled it was time for him to return to school and he drank the rest of his wine to wash the last bite down.

"That was brilliant," he said with a smile. "Coming home for tea might be a better idea from now on, if you want me to, that is."

"I think I'd like that," Tonks said with a smile of her own. She stood with Harry and walked him to the fireplace. "I'll see you when you get home," she said as she hugged him tightly. "I'm glad you liked it."

"I loved it!" He corrected followed by a gentle kiss. "I'll see you in an hour..."

They broke apart and Harry was back at school, teaching another hour of advanced defense. The dueling practice he'd scheduled went marvelously well and it was a proud, but exhausted man that stumbled into the sitting room later that night. Harry looked to the sofa instinctively and frowned slightly when he didn't find Tonks asleep on the sofa. With drooping eyes, he stumbled up the stairs and stared in shock at what was waiting for him.

Tonks was spread over the bed with rose petals strewn all about the floor and covers. There were several candles floating in the air lazily, giving the room a very romantic tinge of orange and yellow flickering light.

"Welcome home..." Tonks purred seductively with a curling of her index finger. "This is the second part of my apology." She slowly slid her hand up her thigh, pulling on the black, silk nighty as she did so.

Harry stood in awe at the extent she was going to and when his mouth dropped open to say something, words failed him and a small squeak came forth instead.

The woman in his bed smiled approvingly and slid to the floor. "How about I help you with those?" she said as she slid his robes from his shoulders and started on his tie.

"What?" Harry said dumbly as he felt his pants slide to the floor.

"Hmm?" she hummed as his shirt fell away and she kissed his neck.

"I didn't think we fought that much..." Harry said in a daze as Tonks slipped her arms around his neck.

"We did fight, and welcome to the make-up sex," she said with a devilish smile, bringing him into a tender kiss that quickly went passionate. Harry's arms found their way around her and before either of them knew it, he had carried her to the bed and slipped her nighty's straps from her shoulders.

“I made... a few... mmm... modifications...” she said between kisses.
“Do you... mmm... like them?”

Harry pulled back slightly and looked her over, a smile forming as his eyes took in the hint of a curve here and a slight dip there. He ran his hand over her flat stomach and lifted her lingerie as he moved it up her thigh.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she whispered as she came in for a nibble on his ear, squirming underneath him as she pulled his boxers off of him.

“Remind me... to fight with you... more often...” Harry gasped a half hour later as he rolled to the mattress. She curled into his side and slid her well-shaped leg over him along with an arm.

“After that, I’ll fight with you as often as you like,” she growled sensually in his ear then kissed his neck. His immediate response to her machinations caused her to smile against his warm skin and she slid atop him once again.

“Another go?” he asked incredulously. She bent and kissed his neck, nibbling at one of the taught muscles that lined it, causing him to issue forth a low groan. She pulled back and nodded as she began once again.

Two hours later, a satisfied Tonks and an even more exhausted Harry lie in bed. The sheets and blankets were long discarded to allow them to cool off and the chilled night air began to take its toll. They brought the blankets over them and within minutes, both were sound asleep.

The next day was hectic for Harry as he rushed out of bed to meet Hermione only a few hours after he'd finally gotten to sleep. They walked and he passed on the news that Sunday was free.

"I'll send Hedwig with instructions Sunday morning," Harry said as they picked the pace up just a little bit. "You can either Floo or apparate and I need to open the wards to allow you entrance."

"Is this a vault?" she asked with a laugh.

Harry chortled and shook his head. "Far from it, but there are quite a bit of protections in place, it was difficult getting the Floo hooked up."

Hermione smiled and they continued their walk, ending in a stretch. "I'm still trying to decide what to cook for tomorrow night, do you have any suggestions?"

"After that mash you made... and it was just thrown together... I think anything would be wonderful," he said with a smile. "Will you have to follow your diet or is it a free evening?"

"I thought about that, but haven't been able to get away from class to ask James," she said as they grabbed their towels. "He tends to go home for lunch and tea except when we have patrol," she explained after a moment. "Maybe he'll be in his office before classes..." Hermione smiled and waved as they parted. "See you Saturday morning!" she called.

Harry waved his reply and jogged back to the gate. "Got to hurry," he said under his breath as he apparated back to the house. He nearly ran to the bathroom to find the shower already occupied.

"Oh, you're home!" Tonks said after a moment.

"I need to hurry," he said between gasps. "Mind if we save some water?"

She sported a roguish smile as she opened the curtain for him. "I think I'm rubbing off on you," she said with a laugh as he grabbed the soap and began cleaning himself off.

"You are a bad influence on me, dear," he said with his own grin. She took the soap from him and scrubbed his back as he shampooed and they reversed duty as he rinsed. "Thanks for the help," he said as he gathered her long, auburn hair to the other side of her neck to kiss her shoulder. "I'm done, but I'll see you for lunch..."

"Alright, Love," she said with a smile and turned to kiss him.

"Love?" he asked with a slight smile and confusion written on his face.

Tonks winced. "Is there something wrong with your wife calling you by a pet name?" she asked.

"No, not at all," he said with a blush. He bent and kissed her tenderly before stepping out of the shower. "I've got to get to the office but I'll see you at noon," he said with a smile.

"Noon? What about breakfast?" she asked over the sound of the water.

"No time, Hermione let slip that she's going to visit the office. Anything particular you want for tomorrow?" he asked as he toweled off and slipped into a clean set of clothes.

"Anything's fine with me," she said absently from the shower.

"Alright, I'll see you at lunch!" Harry said with a wave then ran to the fireplace. He had just seated himself when a knock came at his office door. "Come in," he said as he pulled out his coursework for the day.

"Good Morning," Hermione said with a bright smile. "I was hoping I'd catch you this morning."

"You're in a good mood," Harry said with a returned smile. "Getting used to the exercise?"

"After the third day, the soreness seems to have gone away," she said after a slight yawn. "But it's tiring with the long hours."

"So what can I do for you on this wonderful morning?" he asked as he set aside his stack of papers.

"It slipped my mind to ask what you'd like me to cook tomorrow," she said, "and I was too busy to see you before now," she added with an apologetic shrug.

"No need to apologize," he said with a grin. "Actually, Marion and I were talking about tomorrow and anything is fine with us."

"Should I be concerned about my training diet?"

"I don't think one meal, within reason, would be too bad," he said, patting her shoulder reassuringly. "Make it with less carbohydrate laden foods, say more meat than pasta and if you use pasta, substitute the noodles with something like soba. The key is to increase the proteins over the carbohydrates without sacrificing the food you love to eat."

Hermione nodded and looked up with a smile. "I think I have the menu for tomorrow. Will you be at the Great Hall for lunch or tea today?"

"Lunch, no, but I will be for tea unless Marion surprises me again tonight," he said with a smile. "She went all out last night, wine, candles, the whole deal."

Hermione smiled wistfully. "I remember times like that," she said softly.

"I'm sure you'll have them again, just get into an argument with your boyfriend or husband and as part of the make-up, cook for them," he smiled wickedly. "Or... have him cook it..."

Hermione let out a laugh and shook her head. "I don't have anyone like that in my life, but I'll keep it in mind." She looked at the clock and smiled. "I should head to class, see you at tea, or not," she said with another laugh and left his office.

Harry yawned and stretched as he sat down. "It's going to be a long day today," he mumbled sleepily as he gathered his materials.

"How was your walk this morning?" Tonks asked as they swept the house for inadvertent clues to their identities Saturday morning.

"It was fine. We talked about parts of the war that we both experienced," Harry said as he waved his hand and the dishes found their places in the cupboards. "I didn't realize that she'd given me the strength I needed to finish what I was born to do..."

"You were not a weapon to be used and you know that!" Tonks scolded, setting down a basket of laundry. "Don't go back to that line of thinking!"

"Well, that's how I see it," he said as she put her hands on his shoulders and turned him to her. "You were the only friend I had at the time..." he said quietly as she pulled him into a hug. "With you off doing espionage, I poured myself into the fight."

"Listen, if I could have been there for you, I would have," Tonks said softly into his ear. "I know you were lonely, so was I, and we've got each other to lean on now." She pulled back enough to kiss him gently. "Hermione's back in your life now and things will get better." she said almost sadly.

"Hey..." Harry cupped her cheek and caressed it with his thumb. "Just because Hermione's back doesn't mean I'm going to stop being here for you," he said reassuringly. "I'm not Ron and I do my best to keep promises."

Tonks smiled wanly but nodded. "I know you're better than that," she whispered quietly. "Just don't fall back on that weapon excuse!" she said sternly. "You *are* better than that..."

Harry nodded and rested his forehead against hers. "I'll try," he said quietly. He looked into her hazel eyes and smiled. "I'm glad you chose this color," Harry said after a moment. "Hazel suits you."

Tonks blushed and gave him another, longer, kiss before she pulled away. "We need to get this place straightened up. If you keep sweet talking me like that, we won't get anything done!"

Harry laughed and kissed her forehead. "Right you are! Let's get this place clean."

A couple hours later, following another shared shower, the couple of Aurors were lounging in their sitting room, waiting for Hermione to arrive. It didn't take long until a knock sounded at the door and Harry opened it to a smiling Hermione.

"Let me help you with those bags," he said with a returned smile and gently lifted them from her arms.

"I hope I'm not too late," Hermione said as she hung her cloak on a free peg by the door. "I had to pick up a few ingredients from London and I was afraid there wouldn't be enough time."

"You're fine, Hermione," Tonks said with a smile. "Why don't I give you the tour while James takes those into the kitchen?"

With a smile, Hermione followed the disguised Tonks on a brief tour of the house, ending with the kitchen.

"This is a lovely place," Hermione said with a smile. "And I love your kitchen."

"James does a bit of cooking when he feels up to it," Tonks said with a laugh as she wrapped her arm around Harry's waist.

Harry looked at her before recuperating with his arm around her shoulders. "Well, don't let this one fool you; she's an old hand in the kitchen as well." Tonks kissed him on the cheek and they both laughed, Hermione joining in as she moved to the bags. "Do you need any help?" he asked as he and his pretend wife separated. Harry began peeking in the different bags curiously and Hermione shook her head.

"Today I'll do the cooking and you two can lounge about," she said with a laugh as Tonks pulled him from the grocery sacks. "There's

just a bit of preparation then an hour or so for the oven to do its magic,” she said with a smile.

“Why don’t James and I break out the game table?” Tonks asked with a smile. “That should give us something to occupy our time...”

“That’s a wonderful idea, dear,” Harry said with a grin. “I’ll pull it from the attic if you’ll clear the coffee table out of the way.”

“I’ll be here working on tea,” Hermione said with a smile. She nervously glanced at the clock then shook her head when she realized what she’d done. “Old habits...” she muttered under her breath and started unloading the bags.

Several minutes later, Harry had the game table set in the sitting room. Tonks set about polishing the pieces and the board while Harry snuck into the kitchen for a peek.

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can help with?” he asked as he poked around a simmering pot.

“James! Let Hermione do her thing and get back in here!” Tonks yelled from the other room.

Harry winced and smiled apologetically to her before scurrying back into the sitting room.

“Just leave her alone...” Tonks said irritably. “Why don’t you finish the table and I’ll get drinks?” Without waiting for his response, Tonks tossed the cloth she was using to him and disappeared into the kitchen. A few minutes later, after a bout of laughter from the two women, Tonks walked into the room with glasses of fresh pumpkin juice.

“What was so funny?” Harry asked absently as he tightened the screws that held the table legs steady.

“Just girl talk,” Tonks said with a wry grin. “Are we ready for some backgammon?” she asked over the rim of her cup.

“Should... be...” he replied as he set the table down and wiggled it for stability. “That should do it, I’m going to wash my hands before we play.” With a smile, he went to the bathroom and exited a few moments later.

“Tea should be ready in half an hour,” Hermione said from the doorway. “It’s just a matter of letting things simmer away at this point.”

The three of them took turns playing the various games the table had stored within it —Harry and Hermione adamantly refusing to play any form of chess— and they talked lightly about school and various students they had in their classes.

“I think I’ve adjusted well,” Hermione responded after Tonks questioned her about her transfer from the Ministry. “It’s far busier and helps me keep my mind off of things.”

“How’s the exercise manual holding up?” Harry asked as he had one of his checkers upgraded to king.

“I’ve lost a few centimeters and five kilos so far,” Hermione said with a smile. “I expect it’ll slow down after my body gets used to the exercise.”

“After about two weeks,” Harry said absently. “That’s when we upgrade to jogging and add weight training to your timetable.”

Hermione looked up in surprise. “Weight training? Won’t I bulk up then?”

Tonks laughed. “No, he’ll probably put you on low weight, high repetition, more to mould your muscles than to bulk them up.”

Hermione nodded. “Right, I read something along those lines.” She glanced at the clock out of habit and shook her head. “I really need to stop that, but it’s saved the food, I’ll be right back.”

“Do you need any help plating?” Tonks asked brightly.

Hermione shook her head. "If you could set the table that should be more than enough," she said with a smile. "I'll take care of the cooking and plating."

Excited to do something rather than sit around and smell the wonderful fragrances that were wafting from their kitchen, Harry and Tonks eagerly laid the flatware and plates out on the table.

Hermione walked in a few minutes later carrying two bowls of soup and set them down before dashing back into the kitchen, returning with another bowl for herself and a basket of sliced French bread and cheese wedges. "First course is ready," she said cheerfully.

"First course?" Tonks and Harry said in unison as the three of them took their seats, Harry helping both of the women with their chairs.

"Soup – just a little bouillabaisse – French bread and cheddar," Hermione beamed. "When my parents and I went to France on holiday I had the opportunity to try some. I liked it so much that I taught myself how to make it."

Harry tried an experimental spoonful and his eyes lit up as the delicious liquid spilled over his tongue. "This is very good," he said with a smile as he took another spoonful. "So, are you and your family world travelers?"

"We've tried to vacation in different places," she said after swallowing a piece of bread and washing it down with a sip of her wine. "My parents wanted me to experience more than school and my bedroom."

"Didn't you have anybody to play with when you were younger?" Tonks asked sympathetically.

"Before Hogwarts I was a loner," Hermione admitted quietly. "And for the first five years I attended there I had three best friends, but we drifted apart before we finished Hogwarts... Why we did, I'm not comfortable with talking about just yet, but I regret it."

The conversation soon turned to James and Marion, how they met and when they were married. Tonks and Harry answered the

questions with the proper enthusiasm of two people madly in love and Harry watched as Hermione smiled at the two of them. A bell rang in the kitchen and Hermione excused herself once again.

She reappeared momentarily with three plates, handing Harry and Tonks theirs and setting hers on the table. One more trip into the kitchen and she returned with two large gravy dishes.

"I thought it would be fun to combine a German and a Swedish dish for the main course," Hermione explained as she retook her seat. "I prepared some of the meat before I left but we have Schweinebraten with various vegetables and I have two gravies, one is Swedish, Äppelmos, and the other is derived from the meat."

Harry inhaled deeply before he looked at Hermione and smiled. "And what do they mean?" he asked inquisitively. "I'd guess Äppelmos has something to do with apples and Schweinebraten with pork?"

Hermione laughed. "Sorry, yes, Äppelmos is stewed and mashed apples, you pour it over the meat, and Schweinebraten is the German way to say Roast Pork."

Harry nodded and ladled a small amount of both gravies on his plate. "To see which I like best," he said with a laugh. Hermione and Tonks joined in and they went to work on their plates. Seconds were called for and soon it was time for dessert.

"Just a simple cheesecake," Hermione said with a wistful smile. The glitter in her eyes told Harry that she'd spent quite some time perfecting this dish. "Raspberries, Strawberries, and Cherries as you like," she said as she set the dessert and fruit on the table.

Not a crumb was left when Harry leaned back in his chair and groaned happily. "You could give the house-elves at Hogwarts a run for their money," he said with a smile. "I don't think I've eaten this well since Marion cooked for me last time."

"That was just the other day, James!" Tonks exclaimed with a laugh and slapped his arm playfully.

Harry recoiled as she came at him again after he laughed and finished off his wine when their laughter died down.

"This was a wonderful meal," Tonks said with a smile. "You are truly an excellent chef, thank you."

Hermione blushed and reached for the empty plates but Harry stopped her. "Oh, no," he said with a serious face. "You cooked for us, we'll do the cleanup." Without another word and before Hermione could stop him, Harry flicked his wand and set the dishes to washing themselves. "Though why should we do it the Muggle way in a wizarding village?" he asked with a sly grin.

Tonks and Hermione laughed as they refilled their wine glasses and took seats in front of the fire. The evening filled with small talk about the weather and the upcoming Christmas holiday. Tonks had lazily set her leg on top of Harry's as the evening wore on and after a few hours, Hermione smiled and stood.

"I should head back to the school," she said after Harry and Tonks got to their feet. "I have a big day ahead of me tomorrow."

"Extra lesson plans?" Harry asked as he retrieved her cloak.

"Actually, I'm spending the day with an old friend with whom I hope I can repair our friendship," she said, blushing slightly.

"Ah, one of the ones that you drifted away from?" Tonks asked as she returned from the kitchen.

Hermione nodded and her hosts didn't press the matter.

"Good luck then," Harry said as they saw her out the door. "Don't forget, one more week and the real workout starts. If it's alright with you, I'd like to get you started personally without anybody else present, then, after you've learned the new routine, you can bring anyone else you want."

"Don't be a stranger, Hermione," Tonks said with a smile. "I'm here if you need to talk shop..."

Hermione laughed and hugged each of them briefly. "Thank you for letting me into your home and cooking for you. I'll see you on Monday, James, and I'll keep your offer in mind, Marion."

They waved goodbye once again and closed the door. "That was some food!" Harry said as he rubbed his stomach. "I don't know if I'll be able to move for a while..."

Tonks stepped up to him and hugged him gently. "I know what you mean... It looks like she's getting used to being independent..."

Harry smiled and kissed her gently on the forehead when a knock came at the front door.

"I wonder who that could be?" Tonks said as she went to see who their new caller was.

"Keep your wand ready," Harry said warningly as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He followed behind her, ready to hex whoever it was should they make any aggressive moves.

"Hello?" she asked as she opened the door slightly to look out.

"Excuse me, but was that Hermione Granger that just left?" an aggravatingly familiar voice floated in from outside.

"Who's asking?" Harry commanded from behind Tonks.

"I'm her boyfriend," Ron said loudly. "I've been trying to see her since she moved into the castle, but they won't allow me on the school grounds."

"And with good reason," Harry said as he took over for Tonks. "She specifically requested that nobody is to see her without her express invitation."

"Do you know her?" Ron asked darkly.

"I work with her," Harry said warningly. "Now I suggest you go about your business so my wife and I may retire for the evening."

“Dear, be careful,” Tonks said quietly. “He looks like he’s ready to fight.”

“Can you get me in to see her?” Ron asked as he fidgeted.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot,” Harry replied. “Good evening to you, sir.” Harry cautiously stepped back and closed the door before locking it.

“He looked more nervous than confrontational,” Harry whispered as they stepped back from the door. Tonks went to the nearest window and saw that Ron had already left.

“Maybe we should set the wards against him before we go to bed,” Tonks suggested quietly as she walked back to him. “Just in case...”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Harry said with a grim look on his face. “Wandless magic is handy; did you notice how he was fidgeting?”

Tonks nodded.

“The wards were set to make him feel uncomfortable and try to leave as quickly as possible. The longer he stays, the more uncomfortable he becomes,” Harry explained. “I didn’t want to do anything to hurt him...”

“I know, Love,” she said as she pulled him into a hug. “I’m sorry that you two grew apart...”

Harry wrapped his arms around her protectively. “Why don’t you get ready for bed? I should make sure he’s not trying to follow her to the gates.”

“Be careful,” she said with a peck to his cheek.

“I will,” Harry reassured her. He grabbed his invisibility cloak from under one of the chair cushions and after wrapping himself with its protective fabric, disappeared. He appeared at the gates to Hogwarts and began walking slowly towards Hogsmeade. He heard shouting not far away and picked up his pace to reach the two people he knew were fighting.

"RON! YOU'RE HURTING ME! LET... GO!" Hermione bellowed as she tried to yank her arm out of his grip.

"Not until you tell me why you left!" he spat back. "Was it Harry?! Did he talk you into leaving me?!"

"Harry had nothing to do with my decision to leave you, Ron!" she said angrily. "I found out about your lies and I've had enough of it!"

"I wasn't lying!" he retorted hotly, "They were! They were all lying to you!"

"Right, Ron, and Harry's Voldemort in disguise!" Hermione said sarcastically. "Let me go and leave me alone! I don't want to see you again!"

Ron's anger got the best of him and before Hermione could react; his free hand went into the air. She cringed at the impending impact but when it didn't come, she opened her eyes to see a very confusing sight.

"What the bloody hell?!" Ron shrieked. His arm seemed to be stuck in mid swing.

"I suggest you let the young lady go," Harry said as he pulled his cloak from around his shoulders with his free hand. "She clearly doesn't want to be seen by or with you, and you really shouldn't raise your hand to a woman."

"Who the bloody hell do you think you are?!" Ron bellowed as he wrenched his hand free from Harry's vice-like grip. "This is a private matter between Hermione and me so piss off!"

"As tempting as your offer sounds, I think it wise you unhand Miss Granger," Harry said evenly. "We don't need any violence here."

"You've found it, mate!" Ron said dangerously as he whipped his wand from his pocket. Harry had him beat by several seconds and a carefully placed stunning spell had the redhead falling unconscious to the ground.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, Hermione," Harry said as he kicked Ron's wand away from his limp hand. "He stopped by our place just after you left and I thought it wise to follow, in case he tried something like this."

Hermione stared wide-eyed at her ex-boyfriend, seething with both anger and fear. "I... He-he's never raised his hand to me before," she said breathlessly. "This can't be the man that I..."

Harry stepped over the prone form of his most certainly ex-best friend and hugged Hermione gently. "Why don't you come back to the house and use the Floo," he said comfortingly. "It's much closer than the school grounds and you can try and relax a bit before you leave."

Harry was surprised to have Hermione hugging him back, let alone burying her face in his shoulder, but he did nothing to stop her. He took her in his arms and led her slowly back to the house.

"What happened?" Tonks asked worriedly as Harry handed her his cloak and led Hermione to the sofa.

"That Ron fellow caught up with Hermione and manhandled her," Harry explained. "Could you watch her while I report this to the Auror division?"

Without another word, Tonks brought Hermione something to drink and began examining her for marks while Harry Flooed in and called for an Auror to help with Ron. A few seconds after he pulled his head from the fireplace, a knock came at the door and Harry left with Alastor Moody.

"What's Weasley done this time?" he grumbled as the two of them trudged up the road to where Ron still lay unconscious.

"He was about to hit Hermione," Harry said angrily. "He'd already bruised her up pretty good with the grip he had on her."

"Keep your feelings in check, *James*," Moody said warningly. "We know how you feel about this..."

A few minutes later, Ron was in handcuffs and his wand confiscated. Moody cast an energizing charm on him and Ron looked around angrily.

"Where is the bloody git?!" he growled and settled his gaze on Harry.

"You'll be doing nothing tonight, Ron," Moody said gruffly. "A night in a low security cell at Azkaban should sober you up a bit."

"A-Azkaban?" Ron stuttered helplessly.

"Assault, Mr. Weasley," Moody said with a disappointing shake of his head. "You should have learned after those two girls you beat last time. Second warning is a night in Azkaban, multiple offenses get you longer stays."

"I-I didn't beat anyone!" Ron protested, the fear settling in quickly.

"I have a witness and the victim that say otherwise, Ron," Moody grunted. "You know the law. It was explained to you by your father when he offered to be your council last time."

"Weasley?" Harry asked as if he'd just made the connection. "Ronald Weasley, one of the heroes of the war?" he asked incredulously.

Ron snapped his head towards Harry angrily, "Yeah, what of it?"

"I teach Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts, Mr. Weasley," Harry said evenly. "It seems the history books left something out, I'll have to change my curriculum concerning the last war."

Moody grunted a laugh. "We can't all be as straight and narrow as Harry Potter," Moody said with a concealed wink, watching Ron grow angrier by the second with his magical eye. "That lad did us proud when he joined the Auror division."

"Mr. Moody, would it be asking too much for you to make an appearance in my class?" Harry asked with mock enthusiasm. "I'm sure the students would enjoy hearing about your experiences and any stories you might have..."

“That might be fun,” Moody said with a laugh. “Talk to my chief and we’ll see what we can do. In the meantime, it’s off for a cozy night with a dementor for this one.”

Ron’s anger seemed to leave him immediately. His once red face turned a sickly green then pure white as all the color drained away.

“Come on, Ron,” Moody said irritatingly. “I’ll do you a favor and not let Molly know about this, but you better hope that Skeeter doesn’t catch wind or it could be bad for your whole family.”

Harry watched with satisfaction as Moody took hold of the handcuffs that Ron was chained in and the two disappeared without a sound. “Portkey handcuffs... Sure makes it easier...” he mumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets as he walked back to the house.

“What happened?” Tonks asked quietly from the sofa. Hermione was sitting beside her, head bowed and sipping occasionally from a mug of hot cocoa. Tonks was rubbing her back gently, trying to comfort their friend.

“Mr. Moody has taken him to Azkaban,” Harry informed them. “It was his second offense and that meant a night in a low security cell.”

“Second offense?” Hermione asked, turning around to look at him properly. Harry winced when he saw her red, puffy eyes and the tearstains on her cheeks.

“That’s what Mr. Moody said,” Harry nodded as he sat in a chair next to the sofa. “It seems Mr. Weasley assaulted two girls at some point.”

They both watched as anger boiled within Hermione but it seemed to be fighting with sadness. “It serves him right!” Hermione said angrily. “Another thing he’s lied about!” She set the empty mug on the coffee table and wiped at the new batch of tears that were threatening to fall from her eyes.

“Why don’t you stay in our guest room for the night?” Tonks asked quietly, patting Hermione’s arm reassuringly.

"I couldn't put you out," Hermione said quickly, letting her anger fall to more acceptable levels. "You've both done so much for me already," she turned to Harry and smiled apologetically. "Thank you for helping me, James."

"Something didn't feel right about him, I wasn't going to let you walk back with someone like that trying to track you down," he said with a shrug. "Why don't you stay the night, rest, and go back to the school when you're feeling better?" he offered with a smile. "I'm sure Minerva and Albus will understand, considering the circumstances..."

Hermione looked from Tonks to Harry and sighed. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"Let's get you something to sleep in," Tonks said with a smile. "I think I've got something that will fit."

Harry smiled encouragingly and stood with the women before they disappeared upstairs. He slumped into his chair and sighed, wondering what had happened to his best friends.

An hour later, Harry stepped into the master bedroom to find Tonks sitting on the edge of the bed. "How is she?" he asked quietly.

"She's like any of the young women we've had to deal with in the special victims' division," she said with a tired sigh. "For all intents and purposes, Ron may as well have raped her."

Harry winced at the word Tonks used to describe the situation but didn't argue the point. He sat beside his partner and sighed miserably. "I don't know what happened," he whispered quietly. "He's never acted like this before... Ron's never raised a hand to hit anybody, only Malfoy and his goons," he explained so only Tonks could hear.

She reached over and hugged him tightly. "People change," she said comfortingly, kissing his temple. "Sometimes they change so much you don't recognize them anymore..."

Harry tried to keep the conflicting emotions from bothering him. His love for Hermione, his sadness at losing his best friends, the anger

he'd pushed aside when Hermione needed his help, but most of all, the helplessness he was currently feeling.

Tonks slowly stroked his hair and whispered quietly in his ear, "It's alright, Harry, you don't have to hold it in... I've seen the worst of it and you've seen me too..."

Harry hugged her around her middle and buried his face in her breasts then finally let loose the pain he was feeling. The entire time, Tonks stroked his hair, kissed the top of his head gently, and whispered soothing words into his ear.

Harry woke the next morning, still curled in a ball. Tonks was sleeping behind him, an arm protectively draped over his side and her slow, even breathing tickling his back. He stretched gingerly, not wanting to wake her, but Tonks woke with a start.

"Are you ok?" she asked sleepily, breathing deeply through her nose and looking around for the clock.

"I'm fine, thanks for last night," he whispered and kissed her tenderly on the lips. She smiled and pushed into the kiss, deepening it slightly before Harry pulled away and sniffed the air experimentally.

"I smell bacon," Tonks said after a sniff of her own.

"Hermione must be cooking breakfast," Harry said as he sat up and slipped into a set of sweat pants and a T-shirt. Tonks followed shortly thereafter and they made their way to the kitchen.

"Good morning," Hermione said with a smile. "I thought I'd make breakfast since you helped me last night," she turned back to the frying pan, folding an omelet masterfully and slid it onto a plate. "Did you sleep well?" she asked as she offered plates filled with an omelet and bacon to each of them.

"Like a rock," Harry lied as he started the tea. "I was so stuffed after tea that I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow."

"This one can sleep through most anything," Tonks teased. "There could be explosions just outside the door and he wouldn't bat an eyelash."

Hermione chuckled as she set her own plate on the table and Harry served them all a steaming hot cup of tea.

"Did you sleep alright?" he asked concernedly.

Hermione smiled slightly after she'd taken a bite of her bacon and shrugged. "As well as can be expected," she said with a sigh. "Thank you for letting me stay the night."

"Anytime," Tonks said with a dismissive wave. "Our friends are welcome to stay whenever they want... within reason..." She grinned at Harry. "Remember Frank?" she prompted with a sparkle in her eyes.

Harry caught on and let out a laugh. "Do I? That man let off the worst smell imaginable. I don't know what he ate before he stayed the weekend, but he hasn't been extended an invitation since."

Hermione laughed and smiled at the banter her two newest friends shared as she shook her head. "That must have been horrible!"

"I'm just glad we didn't have to do his laundry!" Tonks said with another laugh. "No telling if that smell was him, what he was wearing, or what died on him!" Harry and Hermione joined in the laughter as well, relishing the few moments of bliss it brought them.

Hermione finished off her tea and the last bite of her eggs before clearing her dishes. "I should be going now," she said apologetically. "I'm meeting my friend later this morning and I don't want to keep him waiting."

"I'll Floo with you to my office. If there's anything that needs to be explained, I can vouch for you," Harry said as he cleared his empty plate from the table. "I'll be back in a little bit, dear," he said with a kiss to Tonks' cheek.

"I'll help myself to more bacon!" she said with a roguish grin. "Take care, Hermione," Tonks added with a serious look. "If you need to talk, you know where we live."

Hermione smiled and hugged Tonks tightly. "Thank you so much, Marion," she said quietly before joining Harry in the sitting room.

"It's a direct connect, so all you have to do is step into the flames," he explained. "I'll follow after."

Hermione stepped into the green, magical fire and Harry followed directly afterwards. When he arrived, he cleaned them both off with a quick scouring charm and unlocked his office door.

Hermione hugged him tightly and whispered, "Thank you for everything, James." She kissed him gently on the cheek and went to the door. "I'll see you tomorrow at tea," then, with a wave, she stepped into the classroom, closing the door behind her.

Harry waited for a while before deciding it was fine to head back to the house and with another burst of green flames, stepped into his sitting room where Tonks was lazily reading a book on the sofa.

"You better get ready," she said absently as she flipped the page. "You still need to send Hermione the directions to your place."

Harry smiled and raced upstairs for a quick shower before returning to the sitting room. "I should be home around nine or ten," he said with a smile and a quick kiss.

Tonks returned his smile and waved. "Enjoy your day," she said before returning to her book.

Harry stepped back and apparated to the entrance hall of his ancestral home with the instructions for Hermione firmly clutched in his hand. He reverted to his normal self and after finding Dobby, had the house-elf prepare the castle for Hermione's arrival. Hedwig was sitting on her perch in the kitchen and looked excitedly at the letter in Harry's hand.

"I'm sorry we had to leave you here without company, Hedwig," he said apologetically as he stroked her white feathers. "Could you deliver this to Hermione for me?" Hedwig answered by gently nipping his finger and offering her leg to him. Harry smiled and tied the note to her then opened the window. "No need to wait for a reply," he said with laugh as Hedwig hooted and flew into the blue sky.

Harry spent the majority of the morning pacing along the marble entry way. He knew Hermione would be arriving shortly after Hedwig had returned and claimed her treat. The white owl had returned barely a half hour prior and Harry was beginning to worry.

“Trying to do your laps without me?” Hermione said with a laugh from the entrance. She was bogged down by three bags of food and with a laugh Harry grabbed two of the bags from his grateful friend.

“Sorry, I had a feeling you’d be here right after Hedwig got back,” Harry said with a smile. “Let’s get these to the kitchens and I’ll give you a tour.”

“How long have you owned a castle?” she asked as her wide eyes took in the sights around them.

“My twenty-first birthday,” he said with a shrug. “I received both Potter and Black estates and trusts. I’d much rather had other things, but that was beyond my control.”

A sad look crossed over Hermione’s face and she looked to him apologetically. “I’m so sorry that I wasn’t here for you,” she said quietly. “It must have been difficult having to relive everything.”

“I can honestly say that I’m fine with Sirius’ death now,” he admitted as he opened the door to the kitchens. “I just wished that you two could have shared it with me. But we can’t do anything about the past...”

“Miss Hermione Granger, Dobby is happy to see her again!” Dobby said then snapped his fingers, relieving the two of their bags.

“Thank you, Dobby,” Hermione said with a smile. “I haven’t seen you in ages! How have you been?”

Dobby smiled sheepishly. “Then Dobby has been doing his job properly! Dobby has been well,” he said, laughed nervously and looked between his two human friends. “Is there anything Dobby can do for, Harry Potter?”

“Hermione has offered to cook today,” Harry said with a smile. “I’ve decided to give you and Winky the day off.”

Dobby’s eyes went wide. “Th-the day off?” he asked incredulously.

“Don’t worry, Dobby, just from the cooking,” Harry said with a reassuring smile. “I thought you might like the extra time to work on the stables like you’ve been talking about.”

Relief visibly passed through Dobby’s body. “Then work on the stables Dobby and Winky will do,” he said with determination.

“I’m going to show her around the castle. If you need me, we’ll be on the grounds most of the day,” Harry said as he opened the door for Hermione once again.

“Dobby understands, Harry Potter,” Dobby said with a nod then disappeared with the snap of his fingers.

“I didn’t know you’d employed Dobby,” Hermione said with a smile, “and Winky too?”

“They’re a package deal,” Harry laughed, “and they kept talking their wages down.” He shook his head, remembering the negotiations. “Well, you’ve seen the kitchens and the main hall, let’s get you acquainted with the rest of the place, shall we?” He offered her his arm and she took it hesitantly. He noticed this and smiled softly. “If that makes you uncomfortable...”

“No, it’s fine,” Hermione said quickly. “Just some things have happened recently, that’s all,” she admitted quietly.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Hermione shook her head. “Not just yet, but soon, I need some time to think about everything.”

Harry didn’t push the matter and Hermione seemed to be relieved that he chose the course of action he did. He instead focused on the tour and after an hour of walking around the castle, the gardens, and a brief glimpse at the outside of the stables, they were back in the kitchens sipping on mugs of tea.

“This is a wonderful place!” Hermione said with a wide smile.

"It's warded against wizards as well as Muggles," Harry explained. "I don't know why mum and dad took us to Godric's Hollow... But when I found out about this place and saw the library, I thought how ironic everything was."

"I know," Hermione said softly, "I shouldn't have listened to him, Harry..."

"It's ok," he said quietly and patted her hand, "we'll work everything out and get back to being best friends again. I just pictured you spending hours reading up there, that's all."

"I would like that," she said with a wistful smile. "I don't think I'd be happy until I've read and reread every single book up there!"

Harry laughed. "I think you'd have to use a Time-Turner to read them all, not to mention the ones I have from the Black estate as well!"

Hermione pretended to swoon at the news and they both laughed genuinely for a time. The clock on the kitchen fireplace's mantle signaled noon and Hermione smiled widely.

"I hope you like Greek food," she said as she got out of her chair. "I thought I could make some spanakopita, kebobs, and some pastes for dessert."

"That sounds delicious," Harry said with a smile. "Do you need any help?"

"I can handle it," she said confidently, "and I thought we could try some Spanish dishes for tea." She bustled around the kitchen with more energy than Harry had seen from her previously and he leaned back in his chair, smiling at her.

"What?" she asked nervously when she'd caught the look on his face.

"I was just admiring the amount of energy you've got," he admitted truthfully. "How's your stomach doing, by the way?"

Hermione blushed slightly and smiled. "You were right; Madam Pomfrey is a miracle worker!" She went back to bustling around the

kitchen, grabbing pots, pans, baking sheets and other necessary tools. "Aside from being overweight, she said that I'm back to being perfectly healthy. I just have to stay away from overly acidic foods for a while."

"I'm relieved," Harry said with a grin.

"Thank you for pushing me in the right direction, Harry," she said with a slight smile. "If it weren't for you showing me the truth, I wouldn't have had the strength to leave."

"It was the least I could do," he said with a shrug, refilling their mugs with fresh tea.

"Why's that?" she asked, turning to him. "All Ron and I ever did was ignore you, even during the final days of the war..."

"That didn't matter," Harry said quietly with a shrug, not looking up from the counter. "You were both safe, that's what mattered to me."

"Harry..." Hermione said gently as she turned him to face her.

"It's ok," he said with a shrug, "I won, he didn't and we're all alive..."

"What I did wasn't acceptable," Hermione said softly, tilting his face to hers. "You needed me, you needed Ron, but we did nothing. I believed his lies and misdirection when I should have been helping you."

"You did," Harry said emphatically, "for five years, you pushed me to study and I learned those habits after having them hammered into my skull."

"I used to watch you in the library," Hermione admitted quietly, "When you quit the Quidditch team after your ban was lifted, I knew something was wrong."

"What was more important?" he asked with a smirk. "Learning how to actually use magic or chase after the snitch?" Harry shook his head and laughed gently. "I wasn't going to let my ignorance destroy everyone else I cared about or the rest of the world."

"You weren't ignorant, Harry," Hermione said quietly, looking into his eyes. "You were and still are the greatest wizard I've ever read about or known."

Harry blushed and found his hand cupping her cheek without his control. "Thank you, but I wouldn't be anywhere or alive if it hadn't been for you, Hermione," he said softly. The look in her eyes had his heart beating rapidly and he could swear that his palms were slick with sweat. Subconsciously, he inched his face towards hers, their eyes still locked and he felt her stiffen at the movement. Harry's daze cleared immediately, he dropped his hand and stepped back from her, cursing himself quietly for what he was about to do. "I'm sorry," he said quickly, "I shouldn't have done that."

"I-it's alright, Harry," Hermione said hurriedly, going back to preparing lunch. "I don't think I'm ready for something like that yet..."

Harry's heart sank a bit and he nodded. "I understand," he said, dumping the now cold tea into the sink and refilling their cups.

Hermione stopped what she was doing and shook her head. "No, how could you?" she asked quietly. "Ron decided to hunt me down last night," she said, her body trembling slightly. "If it weren't for James, I don't know what would have happened. He even raised his hand to hit me."

Harry knew the story but was still angry for what Ron had done. He decided it would be in his best interests to let that anger out now. "*HE WHAT?!*" Harry growled, pretending that it was the first time he'd heard the news.

"After tea with the Bakers," she started, going back to preparing the food, "Ron snuck up behind me and tried to force me to go home with him," she reached for something, stopped, and instead leaned on the counter. "The things he'd said... I couldn't believe that he even had it in him... James showed up just before Ron could hit me and stunned him," she continued quietly. "I found out that he'd beaten two girls at one point..."

Harry gently set his hand on her shoulder, expecting a similar reaction from his attempted kiss, but Hermione turned and buried her

face in his chest. "I talked to Arthur and Molly this morning and they told me they'd promised not to tell me..." she whimpered quietly as his arms wrapped around her. "He told them some story about me being jealous and I'd leave him if I knew..."

"Shh," Harry cooed as he rubbed her back, "he can't hurt you, not as long as I'm still around or this James fellow," he said quietly. "It looks like you've got more friends than you realized..."

Hermione sighed and wiped her eyes. "I do, don't I?" she asked in a whisper, a small smile caressing her lips. "But what if Ron just won't take the hint?" she asked feebly, visibly trembling at the thought. "He's starting to frighten me, Harry," she admitted in a terrified voice. "I've never seen him act like this, not even when talking about you..." Harry winced and she let out a sigh. "I'm sorry," she said quickly, "I shouldn't have..."

"No, that's alright," Harry said, defeated, "There was still a part of me that hoped Ron would get over whatever it was he's got crawling around inside of him... I guess I was wrong."

"I don't know what happened with him, Harry," Hermione said quietly, caressing his cheek with her fingers. "You two were so close it felt that I was intruding on you most of the time."

"You *never* intruded on us," Harry said quietly, "I'm sorry you felt that way..."

"I was the girl of the group," she said with a sad smile, "there's only so much that you could talk to me about..."

"We talked about everything!" Harry said with a snort. "Even Cho and her wet kiss!"

Hermione let out a weak laugh. "I remember that," she said wistfully after a moment. "I hope you can talk to me like that again," she said, gazing into his eyes.

"I hope you can as well," he whispered in reply. Harry felt his emotions begin to take hold again and with a tremendous amount of willpower gently pulled her hand from his cheek then stepped back.

“Why don’t we get to tea?” he asked with a smirk. “It’s a bit late to be eating lunch.”

Hermione chanced a glance at the clock and smiled sheepishly. “Would Greek for tea be ok?” she asked with a nervous laugh. “I’m sorry I took up most of the afternoon...”

“Don’t be sorry,” he scolded playfully, “and that would be wonderful! Would you like my help at all?”

Hermione frowned at him but couldn’t hold back the smile that wanted to break free. “Why don’t you chop the vegetables while I work on the spanakopita? Large cubes if you please,” she said with a smile.

Harry grinned in response and took the offered knife. “Is this big enough?” he asked after a few, deft strokes of the blade.

Hermione’s eyes widened slightly and a smile spread across her lips. “That’s perfect, Harry,” she said with a laugh. “I didn’t know you were so good in the kitchen...”

“I’ve been cooking since I was seven,” he admitted with a shrug.

“Seven? That’d put you...”

“Back at the Dursleys’, yeah,” he said with another shrug. “They had me doing chores like cooking and cleaning since I was young. Whatever Aunt Petunia didn’t feel like doing, I got stuck with...”

“That’s horrible, Harry!” she said, laying a hand on his arm.

Harry let out a soft chuckle. “It’s ok, Hermione,” he reassured her, “that was a long time ago, my life now compared to then is completely different and I don’t have to deal with them anymore.”

Hermione nodded quietly and went back to work. After a few minutes she stopped and looked back to him. “I can’t believe that Ron told you to stay there... I was looking forward to seeing you on the train that summer...”

"I know," Harry said with a sigh, "but you know what happened and they got me to school by Portkey... That's the past, why don't we concentrate on something else?" He smiled and flashed a wink at her which made her blush slightly. "If we don't get this food cooked, we might have to turn it into a midnight snack!"

Hermione laughed slightly and Harry joined in as they went back to preparing their meal. It didn't take long once the food was ready to go into their various cooking places and they talked about what they were doing in their lives.

"How's teaching?" he asked, taking sip of his fresh tea.

"It's great!" she said excitedly. "For the most part, the students actually pay attention to me, not like you when we were in school."

Harry scowled at her playfully. "I listened," he said in a huff, "I can't help it that it took me five years to apply myself..."

"You did, and you were third in the class..." she said with a smile. "I was proud of you!"

Harry blushed and hid his smile with his mug. "Well, I also had to bring my marks up to get into Auror training..." he said with a sheepish grin. "And I thought we were going to concentrate on talking about the present and future, not the past," he said with a laugh.

Hermione smiled shyly and nodded. "You said that... but there's so much that I missed these last five years..."

"Not much really happened," Harry said with a dismissive wave. "I spend most of my time with Tonks either on or off assignment. We're usually on assignment though, but that doesn't matter much to me..." he trailed off with a twinkle in his eyes that Hermione had seen once before.

"Harry, are you and Tonks close?" she asked quietly, a bit of a nervous twinge to her voice.

"She and I made a promise to each other during the war," Harry said after a moment, "that neither of us would be alone again."

Hermione nodded. "So you're together then?"

Harry thought for a moment and nodded slowly. "Sort of," he admitted, "for company, support, friendship... things were rough after the fighting and you saw my condition when I got back... She and I both needed someone and since we were on assignment together the majority of the time, we became more intimate than you'd think friends would be."

"I'm glad you had someone, Harry," Hermione said softly, a slight smile on her lips, "I was hoping that you weren't alone, dealing with everything by yourself."

Harry smiled and set his hand on Hermione's arm. "We took care of each other when we needed it, and we still do," he explained. "She told me to tell you how I felt... I'm glad that she pushed me, I listened, and now I've got you back in my life."

Hermione looked at Harry with mild confusion but before she could say anything, the timer went off signaling tea was complete. "We need to get that before it burns!" she said quickly, bustling over to the stove, then the oven.

Harry watched her prepare their plates and got up to help with fresh drinks and flatware. Once they were both seated, Harry looked to her with a raised eyebrow. "What did you want to ask before we were interrupted by the bell?" He popped a fresh piece of spanakopita in his mouth and smiled at its savory texture. "This is divine..." he said with a content sigh.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "It's not important, Harry," she admitted quietly. "The trick with spanakopita is the way you prepare the butter for the filo dough." She smiled again when he let out a grateful groan and then she looked to her plate. "You knew I would ask you anyway, important or not... D-do you love Tonks?" she asked quickly.

Harry stopped midway through taking another bite and he looked to Hermione in surprise. "Do I love her?" he asked, stopping to think about the question. "I love her, yes," he said without much hesitation and he saw Hermione's shoulder's drop slightly. "But I'm not *in love*

with her and she's not in love with me," he added quickly. "We've been close friends for some time now and haven't really gone beyond that."

Hermione visibly relaxed and nodded. "I was just curious," she said softly as a slight smile began to caress her lips.

Harry finished the task he was interrupted from and smiled slightly as well. "Is this about the kiss to her forehead at the hospital?"

It was Hermione's turn to be surprised and she looked up. "Why do you ask that?" she asked quickly.

Harry shrugged. "Tonks told me about your reaction," he said with a bite of his kebob, followed by a smile that made her blush.

"Well, it took me by surprise..." she lied quickly and Harry nodded, letting her think that he'd believed her.

They finished their meal in companionable silence, enjoying spending time with one another as they had before Ron's mysterious changes split them apart. Harry quickly set the dishes to cleaning themselves and the two of them walked up to the library.

"I thought we could finish the night off with a little reading," Harry said with a smile. "You can borrow whatever you start, of course."

Hermione's eyes lit up at the prospect and gave him a tight hug before running over to the shelves, and browsing eagerly for something interesting. Almost immediately she returned with four thick tomes and sitting on a nearby sofa, began to greedily scan the pages of the first in the stack.

Harry laughed and sat next to her on the Gryffindor replica furniture. "I didn't think you'd take long," he snickered, watching her eyes flit from line to line, page to page in rapid succession.

"I have a lot to catch up on!" she said eagerly, looking up to smile genuinely at her friend before returning to the book.

Harry laughed again as his mind began to wander. Their conversation about Tonks had him reminiscing about the previous night when he suddenly remembered something he'd forgotten. Harry glanced at the clock quickly and noted that it was only six.

"Is anything wrong?" Hermione asked concernedly from her end of the sofa. "You look worried."

Harry brought himself out of his thoughts and smiled reassuringly. "I'm not worried," he replied with an apologetic smile. "I just remembered a deal I had with Tonks about going out Sunday..."

"Do you have to go?" she asked with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

Harry sighed and nodded. "To spend the day with you, I had to shuffle some stuff around, I almost forgot and I don't want her to be upset." He smiled apologetically again and stood from the sofa. "Please stay as long as you like, Dobby and Winky can help you with anything you need."

Hermione stood with him and pulled Harry into a warm, tight, hug. "Will I still see you tomorrow morning?" she asked quietly as he returned her embrace.

"You can bet on it!" Harry said with a laugh. "I don't want to leave, but I really should," he said softly. "If you ever need to talk, I'm only an owl away."

She pulled away enough to look into his bright, green eyes and smiled when she saw the truth reflected back at her. "I'm sorry I can't return what you have for me, Harry," she whispered apologetically. "It's just going to take some time... c-can you be patient for me?"

Harry smiled and fought the urge to kiss her once again. "I can wait..." he whispered back quietly, forcing himself to leave their embrace. "I'll see you in the morning, Hermione."

"Goodnight, Harry," she said with a wave. "Tell Tonks I said 'hello.'"

Harry smiled and with a wave and a nod, left the library in a hurried walk to the kitchens. He arrived to find Dobby and Winky enjoying their meal at the large table he and Hermione had sat at earlier.

“I need a big favor, if you’ll help me...” Harry announced pleadingly to his house-elf employees. Their ears perked up at his words and they listened intently to his request.

An hour later, Harry apparated down the street from his house in Hogsmeade as James Baker then nearly ran back to the house, hoping that Tonks was still out and about doing their citizenly face time. His hopes were rewarded when he found the house empty and with a quick round trip to his castle, he returned with Dobby and Winky apparating in directly afterwards. Harry ran to the window to see if the coast was clear and spied Tonks walking down the street with a bag in her arms.

“We don’t have much time!” Harry said quickly. “Winky, can you handle the bedroom while Dobby takes care of tea?”

With a nod and a crack, Winky disappeared while Dobby immediately set to work magically dressing the table with Gryffindor colors, flatware, and china from the castle. He rushed into the kitchen and retrieved the cooked meal from the castle, filling the plates with savory meats and other foods.

Harry raced upstairs to change, stopping by the now finished bedroom, completely decorated for a romantic evening. He smiled at Winky’s efficiency and decorating skills before throwing on a clean set of clothes and robes.

“Dobby is finished, Harr... err James Baker,” Dobby squeaked from the doorway. “Winky tells Dobby that she is finished as well.”

“Thanks for the help!” Harry said with a clap to the elf’s shoulder before patting on some aftershave. “Remind me to treat you two to icecream next time I’m at the castle!”

Dobby’s grin spread from ear-to-ear as Harry smiled and raced down the stairs. He’d just gotten to the door and opened it when Tonks stepped onto the porch.

“James?!” she squeaked in surprise. “What are you doing home so early?”

Harry relieved her of her bag and took her hand. “There was a promise that I needed to keep,” he said with a smile.

“What promise was that?” she asked, bemused, as he led her into the sitting room to the meal that awaited her. “What?” She looked at him completely surprised as he set the bag on the sofa.

Harry laughed and pulled her into a hug, kissing her tenderly before pulling back again. “I promised to take you out tonight, didn’t I?” he asked with a grin then led her to her chair. “I botched the going out portion so I went for eating in instead. Have you eaten yet?”

Tonks’ face flushed bright pink as she looked over the table. “N-no,” she stammered, “I just got back from the market...”

Harry kissed the top of her head and slid her chair out for her. He helped her sit then took his seat as well, grabbing the bottle of wine that was waiting to be poured.

“You didn’t have to do all of this...” she said, still taken aback by the surprise.

“I know, but I wanted to make it up to you for forgetting,” he admitted as he filled her glass. “Dobby and Winky helped though,” he said with a nervous laugh.

“But your day with Hermione...” She looked up at the smiling man across from her and her cheeks went pink again.

“It went fine,” Harry said with a smile. “We discussed a few things and she’s still working through her feelings...” he explained hurriedly. “She’s in the library reading, which she hasn’t had time to do since we were in school.” He shrugged and began plating Tonks’ food without a second thought. “I gave her free reign of the library and anything connected with us or the case has been secreted away to the castle vaults.”

Tonks nodded dumbly, a smile spreading on her lips as she watched Harry deftly fill her plate with the correct proportions of what she would have chosen. She looked up at him again and set a hand on his arm. "Thank you," Tonks said quietly.

Harry smiled and shrugged. "I might have forgotten, but I got here in time. I'm sorry I had in the first place..."

"Not for the meal, James, for being you," she corrected and leaned in for a kiss.

Harry blushed and shook his head after kissing her tenderly. "You don't have to thank me for that... I'm a right git at times..." He smiled and motioned to her plate. "Go on and tuck in..." he said with a chuckle.

Tonks laughed and they soon found themselves comfortably full, not as full as they were with Hermione's cooking, Harry saw to that, and he smiled at her stifled yawn.

"Tired?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

"Slightly," she replied with a goofy grin of her own.

"Why don't you take a nap? I'll even tuck you in," Harry suggested as he stood and helped her up.

"What did I do to deserve this treatment?" she asked skeptically, but the smile on her face belied any irritation at the way Harry was doting on her.

"I've been ignoring you for some time now," Harry explained as they walked up the stairs. "I thought it was time to remedy that..."

She laughed as he opened the door to their bedroom and led her inside. Her eyes went wide at the decoration and she spun around to see a smirking James Baker.

"You like?" he asked, amused.

She turned around slowly, taking in every detail, the blush in her cheeks rising and the smile on her face widening as everything began to sink in. "You did all of this... tea and this," she started with a feeble wave of her hand, "all of this for me?" she finished quietly.

"Why shouldn't a husband dote on his beautiful wife?" he asked cheekily before she turned to face him properly once again. He frowned and quickly wiped away the tears that were gliding down her cheeks. "Is everything ok?" he asked in a concerned whisper.

Her reply came in the form of a beautiful, auburn-haired woman wrapping her arms around him tightly, pressing her lips against his in a fiery kiss. He felt her smile against his mouth and noted her freshly wet cheeks. "I'm fine," she whispered, pulling herself closer to him. "Nobody's ever done this for *me*," she said through a sob. "I've always fulfilled *their* dreams, not the other way around..."

Harry wrapped his arms around her in what he thought was a bone-crushing hug but she seemed to not care. "Shh, don't cry," he whispered gently, stroking her long, silky-soft hair. "Why don't we test the new bed that Winky transfigured for us?" His smile curved into a roguish, lop-sided grin as she hungrily tore at his clothes and a few minutes later, they were under the covers exploring each other once again.

Tonks rolled to the side of her partner, savoring the taste of Harry's sweat-laden body as she nipped and licked his neck. He was panting due to their activity but still let out groans of pleasure as she hit all the right spots on his skin.

"That was amazing," she whispered hotly in his ear, causing him to be aroused once again. She smiled at his reaction and decided to nibble on his earlobe to give him a rest before they did anything else.

"I'm glad you're enjoying 'tea,'" Harry said with a smile, running his fingers over her sweat-covered body, eliciting a moan from the woman in his arms.

"Tea?" she asked incredulously. "No, this was dessert!" she said with a fierce passion and hungrily devoured his lips once again. She

pulled him atop her, wrapping her long legs around his waist and buried her fingers in his short, brown hair.

They enjoyed themselves for the majority of the evening when a knock came at their front door.

"Let them go..." Tonks moaned as Harry lifted his head. "Mmm... Don't stop..." she whined, taking his head in her hands and guiding him back to his previous task.

The knocking at the door came again and Tonks groaned in frustration. "Be right there!" she called through the house before throwing the blankets off of her and Harry. They both got dressed and made themselves presentable before heading to the front door.

"Hermione?" Tonks asked incredulously.

"S-sorry," Hermione stammered quickly, "i-is this a bad time?"

Tonks looked to Harry then to her regret shook her head. "No, come in, is everything ok?" she asked concernedly, leading their friend to the sofa.

"Do you want anything to drink?" Harry asked quietly. "Water, pumpkin juice?"

"Do you have anything a bit stronger?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Be right back with wine then," Harry said as he dashed into the kitchen for three glasses and the wine he and Tonks shared for tea.

"Is this for women only?" Harry asked as he handed her a glass and filled it to her liking.

"If you don't mind?" Hermione shrugged apologetically.

"Of course not, I'll be in my office here if you need me," he said with a warm smile and disappeared upstairs with his glass. Just as he sat down, he heard a quiet hoot from the window and he looked up to see Hedwig sitting quietly on the sill, a rolled parchment tied to her leg.

“Hedwig?” Harry whispered quietly. “I’m sorry, but Hermione’s here...”

The owl seemed to nod in understanding but held out her leg for Harry anyway. There was a note attached and he quickly untied it. “I’m sorry, you know you’re always welcome here, but we have to lay low while on assignment,” he whispered in explanation, caressing the owl’s snowy white feathers. He gave her an owl treat and with a gentle nip at his finger, she took the confection and flitted off into the night, silent as a gentle breeze. He unrolled the parchment and read it carefully.

Dear Harry,
I’m so sorry that I denied you what you wanted today. I really wanted to kiss you too, but I can’t let myself fall into a routine of dependence so soon after leaving Ron. I hope that isn’t why you left so early today, I didn’t mean to hurt you and if I did, I am truly very sorry. Today was one of the most wonderful days I’ve had since we stopped talking. Just being with you made me so much happier than I’ve ever been... you were right about the forced smiles and cheerfulness with Ron. I hadn’t seen it before my rose colored glasses were removed, but I’d fallen out of love with him quite some time ago. I guess I stayed in the relationship because I didn’t know what else to do, I was afraid to be on my own... I also realized that I don’t want you out of my life and if at all possible, I’d like to spend more time with you so we can get to know each other again. I was so surprised when I found out about you and Tonks, but I guess it was inevitable with both of you on assignment most of the time during and after the war. Today was also the first day that I learned more about your past with those evil Muggles! I never knew that they had you cooking for them at such a young age! I sincerely hope that we can spend more quality time talking together, just sitting on the couch enjoying a fire and a nice book, or just being together... I’m rambling again, I know... Harry, I’m not saying that I will never feel the same for you as you do for me, but please, please, be patient with me while I work things out? I’ve found new friends in the Bakers; James is such a wonderful man and his wife is amazingly kind. I hope to spend more time with my

*new friends and rebuild the life that I let squander away. If you still
want to spend time with me, send an owl, ok?
I hope I see you tomorrow morning at five...
Love from
Hermione*

Harry set the letter down and buried his face in his hands with a sigh. He was happy that she wanted to be in his life more often, but he couldn't really commit to anything until after this assignment was completed. Harry took a long pull from his wine and leaned back in his chair hoping that Hermione would be alright and he grew curious as to what they were talking about downstairs. Several times he'd started to tiptoe to the door, his curiosity gaining the upper hand in his struggle to give them some privacy, but he decided against eavesdropping. He had just taken his seat once again after pacing around the room when Tonks appeared in the doorway.

"Is she alright?" Harry asked concernedly, crossing over to place his hands on her upper arms.

Tonks nodded and wrapped her arms around his waist, slipping into a comfortable embrace. "She's confused," Tonks said from his chest. "Spending the day with *Harry* was wonderful for her but she doesn't know if she loves *him* or even can... She's afraid that by not returning *his* affections that *he'll* push away from her," she said with a sigh. "You almost kissed her tonight?" Tonks asked quietly.

"I almost did, but I stopped," Harry admitted. "She didn't want to, and I wasn't going to force anything on her, even a simple peck on the cheek."

Tonks nodded against his chest. "She's gone back to the school for the night," she explained as she pulled away. "You've got classes tomorrow, we should turn in..." Tonks turned away, but Harry caught her arm.

"Hey, are you ok?" he asked tenderly, turning her back and frowning when she didn't look up. He hooked her chin and tilted her sad face to his. "Why the long face?"

Tonks forced a smile and shook her head. "I'm just tired, we had a pretty active afternoon," she said in an attempt to change the subject, which Harry saw right through.

"You forced a smile and I can tell that you're still far from tired..." he said quietly, refusing to let her lie to him. He walked her to their bed and sat down with her. "What's wrong? You can tell me..."

Tonks shook her head. "I don't know, honestly," she admitted as tears began to form in her eyes.

"Hey..." he whispered when she wiped at her eyes in frustration. Harry pulled her into a soft, gentle hug and stroked her hair. "Shh," Harry cooed to her, "you don't cry easily..." he said quietly and tipped her face to his again. "Is the depression coming back?" Harry asked concernedly.

Tonks sputtered a laugh and shook her head. "Not more than usual," she said quietly. "Why are you so bloody nice to me all the time?" she asked incredulously.

"Because I happen to care a great deal about you," he explained, wiping away her tears with his warm thumbs. "Because you're beautiful no matter what you look like, you're kind, giving, and wonderful," he said quietly, followed by a soft kiss.

She smiled and hugged him tightly. "You always know what to say, don't you?" Tonks asked quietly from his chest. She stifled a yawn and laughed nervously afterwards.

"I guess you are tired, aren't you?" Harry said with a laugh. "It's late, and you were right, I do have classes in the morning," he whispered in her ear. "Why don't we get some sleep and see how we're feeling tomorrow?"

She nodded from his chest but stayed in his arms for a bit longer as he rubbed her back. "Okay," she said simply after a few minutes. Tonks looked into his eyes and smiled at the kindness and compassion she saw reflected in the deep green pools that were scanning her eyes.

"I still say that hazel is a perfect fit for you," Harry said with a smile after she kissed him tenderly. He stood and they both undressed, climbing under the covers to share each other's warmth. Harry was half asleep when he felt Tonks pull him in tighter and whisper something that he didn't quite catch. "Goodnight," he said quietly, wrapping an arm around her, feeling a moist, soft kiss on his jaw before he fell asleep.

Harry woke the next morning to his alarm, signaling it was time for his morning walk with Hermione. Tonks was still protectively wrapped around him and he didn't want to wake her, but couldn't be late for his morning get-together with his friend. He tried to move her arm and leg gently, but she fidgeted in her sleep and clung to him even tighter. He chuckled slightly and with a wave of his hand, Tonks floated off of him gently. He quietly slid out of bed and dressed for a morning of exercise and turned to find a bleary-eyed woman looking at him from her pillow.

"Off to see Hermione?" she asked quietly, rubbing away the sleep in her eyes.

"Morning walk today," Harry said, leaning in to kiss her forehead. "I'll be sure I'm back by breakfast..."

"Don't go as James," she warned as Harry reverted to his normal state.

"I wasn't," he said with a soft chuckle. "Get some more sleep and I'll see you when I get back."

Tonks rolled over in the bed, hugging his pillow to her as she closed her eyes. "Don't be late!" she reminded him just before he apparated.

Harry shook his head and walked to the Quidditch pitch. Hermione was walking slowly from the castle and he waved to her once she'd seen him.

"I was hoping you'd come..." she said as her smile grew wider.

"Wild hippogriffs couldn't keep me away!" Harry said with a laugh. "Look, I didn't leave because of you, honest..."

Hermione nodded. "I believe you..." she said quietly.

"And I'm sorry I didn't return your owl last night," Harry said apologetically, "I figured I could just talk to you this morning..." He gently set a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "I do understand how you feel and if friendship is all you want right now, then that's what you'll have."

Hermione smiled and hugged him tightly for a moment. "Thank you, Harry," she said quietly, "you don't know how much this means to me..."

"Oh, I beg to differ," he said with a laugh as they began stretching. "I seem to recall wanting to spend time with you for a while as well..." He smiled reassuringly to show that he wasn't angry before they began their laps.

They talked animatedly about their pasts, before they'd met. Neither was very comfortable speaking about why they'd drifted apart and kept the topics to before they went to Hogwarts. With their exercise finished, they bid each other farewell, both feeling lighter than they had before meeting that morning.

"I'm home!" Harry called from the bedroom in his James persona. There wasn't an answer and Tonks wasn't in bed so he went downstairs after changing into a set of robes, just in case there was company. He felt lucky when he walked in on Hermione and Tonks, who were deep in conversation, and he stopped at the bottom of the stairs when both women looked up at him.

"James!" Tonks said with a surprised smile. "I didn't hear you come home..." She rose from the couch and welcomed him back with a proper hug followed by a kiss.

"I just apparated into the bedroom," he explained with a sheepish grin, "thought I might surprise you, but it was turned back on me... Good Morning, Hermione," he added with a cheerful smile.

"Good Morning, James," Hermione returned with a smile of her own. "Sorry if I've ruined any of your plans..."

"You haven't ruined any plans!" Tonks said in a huff then sat back down beside her with a laugh.

"I'll just take that shower before heading to the office," Harry said with a smile and left the two women alone. It didn't take him too long to wash up and change into a clean set of robes so he went to the kitchen for a quick breakfast.

"Do you mind if I Floo in with you this morning?" Hermione asked from the doorway. "I don't have a class until later so I'll be able to catch a shower when we get there..."

"Not a problem, I'll be leaving in about ten minutes, is that fine?"

"That's perfect," Hermione said with a smile and disappeared back into the sitting room.

Harry laughed and finished his morning meal before catching Tonks in a hug from behind.

"Don't scare me like that, James!" she scolded him with a laugh.

"Ah, but you love me for it!" he teased in return.

"I do, but stop it..." she said with a quick kiss. "You two should get in to work, I'll see you at lunch, Love." Tonks added with a kiss to punctuate her pet name for Harry.

Harry blushed slightly and smiled, scooping up his briefcase and throwing in a pinch of Floo Powder. He waved and followed Hermione into the bright green flames to his office.

"Sorry to have surprised you this morning," Hermione said with an apologetic smile. "I wanted to thank Marion for the other day."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said with a slight chuckle, "you're always welcome in our house."

Hermione smiled and gave Harry a quick hug. "Thank you for being such wonderful friends," she said with a wide smile. "I don't know if I could make it alone..."

"I'm sure all your other friends are there for you too," Harry said with a shrug. "Our door is always open if you need to talk, and it seems Marion has been doing an outstanding job so far!" He let out a laugh. "She isn't normally a morning person, but she must have been up when you got there."

"She was," Hermione admitted, "but I'm thankful none-the-less... Oh, you have class in a few minutes! I should head to my suite..." she said quickly and blushed. "I'll see you at tea!" She waved and smiled before leaving the office in an attempt to get to her room before the students began to file into the classroom.

Harry shook his head and laughed as he pulled out the coursework for the day and after the bell rang his morning disappeared in a flash.

"I'm home!" he called as he set his briefcase on a table near the fireplace. "Marion?!"

"In the back garden..." He heard faintly from the back of the house. Harry crossed to the back yard to smile at the sight of his pretend wife hunkered down on all fours, repotting a plant in their garden.

"Hey there," he said with a smile, crossing his arms and admiring the view, "what made you decide to work in the garden today?"

Tonks turned to look at him and beamed at the appraising look on his face. "I just got an urge to plant a few flowers this morning," she admitted as she stood and dusted herself off. "What do you think?" She stepped aside and Harry smiled at the amount of work she'd gotten done.

"All of this, the Muggle way?" he asked with a raised eyebrow as he looked over her handiwork.

"Does that surprise you?" she asked in a huff.

"Well, yes, since you've been born and raised as a witch, I thought magic would have been the first recourse," he looped an arm over her shoulders and smiled brightly at her. "You did a wonderful job! My aunt would be jealous of this work!"

Tonks beamed at his praise and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm glad you like it," she said excitedly, "there are lilies, asters, and acacias here." She pointed animatedly to her right and left.

"I like the daffodils you've set off by the... gardenias?" Harry asked, looking at the small arrangement.

"Yes, gardenias," Tonks said, squatting next to him. "I couldn't decide if I liked the jonquil or mimosas better so I bought them both and they fit wonderfully well here..." She pointed around the daffodils to a trail of differing flowers that eventually led to a pair of new rose bushes.

"White and Red roses?" Harry asked as he bent to sniff at a bloomed red rose. "You're really getting into this, aren't you?" he asked with a laugh.

Tonks wrapped her arms around him from behind as he plucked one of the rose blooms from the bush. "We're going to be here for a while... I can't just sit around and read all day..." she said with a wide smile as he slipped the flower into her hair.

"I don't have much time left, how about a quick lunch with your husband?" he asked with a slight grin, turning to capture her fully in his arms.

"Sounds like a wonderful plan, Love," she returned with a kiss.

They walked arm-in-arm into the house, Tonks sitting Harry down at the table and bringing him a drink and a sandwich.

"I didn't mean for you to serve me," he said with a laugh as the plate was set in front of him.

"I don't mind," she said with a wide smile. "Start your lunch, I'll be right back." She returned a few minutes later with a catalog and her own food and drink. "Do we have enough time to look at some decorating guides?" Tonks looked into his eyes hopefully and after a quick glance at the clock Harry smiled and nodded, eliciting a wide smile from the woman sitting next to him.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked with a curious grin.

The remainder of his lunch was spent going over different color options and curtains for the house. Harry had to admit that the place was still far under decorated for a married couple, but they'd just arrived and he felt there was no harm in playing the role that he was in at the moment. The time to return to the school was soon upon him and with another kiss and a wave, he found the afternoon speeding by just as quickly as the morning.

"How were classes today?" Hermione asked as she took the seat next to him at the professors' table.

"Truthfully?" Harry asked as he ladled some stew onto his plate. "They went by far too quickly. How were yours?"

"The first half of the day was spent chasing animals around the room... Transfiguring pets into water goblets... Thankfully I have a few detentions doled out to clean up what the pets left behind or Filch wouldn't be too happy" she replied with a sigh. "The other half of the day went by much more smoothly, however." Her plate filled with what was on her training diet for the day and she smiled at the glass of pumpkin juice that also magically appeared before her.

They were interrupted from their small talk by the clinking of a spoon on the deputy headmistress' glass. The Great Hall quieted as the headmaster of Hogwarts stood and cleared his throat.

"This weekend marks the first Hogsmeade trip of the year," Albus said with a slight smile, "as I'm sure most, if not all of you are aware. There is an announcement concerning trips to Hogsmeade: Until further notice students are to remain in groups of three or more while visiting the village." A slight murmur rose from the students at the proclamation. "Yes, it is a different policy than in previous years but there is good reason. The Ministry has informed me there may be trouble brewing in the village and I'd like for you to be careful and watch each other's backs while you enjoy your liberty this weekend. Professors Baker, Granger, and Sinistra will be added to the normal contingency of chaperones to help in case of emergency. Please enjoy your meal!" With that, he sat and smiled at Professor McGonagall, engaging her in a conversation of sorts.

Harry turned back to his plate, taking a long drink from his goblet.

“Did you volunteer?” Hermione asked after finishing the last bite from her plate. “For the Hogsmeade trip that is...”

Harry shrugged. “I live there so I offered to help when I was needed,” he said with a chuckle at her smile. “Is there something funny about that?” he asked with a grin as her smile quickly hid itself.

“No, nothing at all,” she said quietly, smiling nervously for a second. “I’m just glad I’ll have a friend out there with me, in case, well... you know,” she said with a slight shudder.

“Don’t worry about him,” Harry said evenly, trying to keep his anger for Ron at bay. “I won’t be the only one keeping an eye out for you, so enjoy the trip and watch over the students...”

“Thank you for that,” she whispered, “even though my friend Harry is back in my life, it’s good to know that there are others out there willing to be there for me...”

Harry smiled reassuringly and patted her arm. “No need to thank me,” he said as he pushed his empty plate away. “That’s what friends are for and you can count on Marion and me to be there should you need us.” He stood and patted her shoulder before leaving for his extra lessons, which flew by rather quickly as well. Harry soon found himself walking the corridors listening to Hermione talk about her adventures when she was younger and a student at the school. He laughed at the right places and cringed when necessary. When it became his turn, he shrugged and talked about all the moving around he did. Harry imagined what his real parents were like and used them as a model when describing them to her. Luckily, he’d spent a year visiting both Beauxbatons and the Salem Witches’ Institute so he was able to elaborate more when talking about his school days.

Hermione seemed mildly disappointed when their shift ended and Harry walked her back to her room as he had been doing every time they’d patrolled. “See you tomorrow!” he said cheerfully with a wave goodbye. Hermione mirrored his actions and forced a smile as he turned to his office.

She’s not happy about something... Harry thought as he went over a few last minute lesson plans. *I’m sure she’ll talk to Mari... err Tonks*

about it... He chuckled to himself for mixing up his partner's names then thought for a moment. "I shouldn't correct myself, just for safety's sake..." he whispered as he stepped into the fireplace.

Harry chuckled when he saw the auburn-haired woman asleep on the couch with a gardening book resting on her stomach. He marked the page and set the book aside before lifting the slumbering Tonks in his arms. She shifted and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder, mumbling something he didn't catch. This time, she didn't complain when he sat her on the bed and removed her clothes for the evening. He smiled slightly and helped her under the covers before doing the same for himself.

Tonks rolled into him and kissed him tenderly on the neck. "Hi," she said groggily, "I've missed you, Love."

Harry smiled and wrapped his arms around her. "I'm right here, Marion," he whispered back sleepily, "get some sleep..."

She nodded slightly and as Harry began to lose consciousness, he felt her deep, even breaths tickling his chest.

"Will you be going on every Hogsmeade trip?" Tonks asked irritably the next morning after Harry returned from walking with Hermione.

"I most certainly am," he replied bewildered. "I'll be able to watch over the students when they're here, we *live* in Hogsmeade so it's not that far away, and I can keep a covert eye on people around the village. What's wrong with that?"

"Weekends are the only time we can spend together!" she exclaimed, still irritated. "I know we go to the Three Broomsticks usually, but at least we're having an enjoyable time without hundreds of students swarming between us..."

"We still can," Harry said shaking his head and wondering why they were even arguing about this. "I just have to be available if something happens, it's not like I'm inviting the school to our house for brunch!" Just then the clock signaled that it was time for class and Harry frowned. "I have to get to work. We'll just have to continue over lunch!" He grabbed his briefcase and stormed into the fireplace,

completely irritated that he was late for class and that Tonks was even arguing with him about a simple trip to the village.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he announced to the first class of the day, "Please open your books to page fifty-seven..." The rest of the day went just as well as his morning, Snape seemingly irritating him for the joy of it by suddenly pulling him out of the class just before lunch.

"What is it, Severus?" Harry asked somewhat grumpier than he intended. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you... What's on your mind?"

"The headmaster would like to see you during lunch," the potions master said breezily. "He asked me to inform you and I have." Snape sneered and swooped down the corridor, causing a few first years to shuffle against the wall in fear. Harry shook his head and grumbled as he re-entered the classroom to assign homework. The bell rang and he found himself in his office, on all fours with his head in the fireplace.

"I know this is bad timing!" Harry snapped back. "I've got to meet with Dumbledore about something; I'll have to see you at tea."

Tonks looked at him crossly before leaving the sitting room for the kitchen, stomping angrily the entire way. Harry watched her storm off with a mix of anger, resentment, guilt, and surprise before returning fully to his office. He walked swiftly to the headmaster's office and at the invitation extended to him, stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"Is there anything wrong?" Albus asked concernedly from behind his desk. He waved his hand causing a platter of sandwiches and two goblets to appear on his desk.

"Marital problems," Harry growled as he slumped into his chair. "There shouldn't be any, but I guess some friction was going to come up, living in close quarters for as long as we have..."

The headmaster's eyes twinkled momentarily before he cleared his throat. "I have news for you concerning your case," he said gravely. Harry perked up immediately at the nibble he was offered and

nodded for his old mentor to continue. "It seems that there have been movements in the new Death Eater factions," Albus explained, "and there might be an appearance in the area this weekend."

"You're going to cancel the trip, aren't you?" Harry asked earnestly.

"I can't do that," Dumbledore said as he stroked his beard. "If I were to suddenly cancel the Hogsmeade trip, it would raise too many suspicions. The trip will continue as planned, I'll inform those professors who know of the Order and grant them leave to attend the village as well."

Harry nodded and rested his chin on his steepled fingers. "I'll let Marion know when I get home tonight," he said, anticipating Dumbledore's next question. "We're going to have quite the talk anyway but I'm sure she'll be happy to know we might have a lead..."

The rest of the day went by in a flash, his final class ended just as he was getting impatient to get home. As the bell rang, he rushed to put his papers together and announced that his office hours would be after tea during the extra hour of instruction. With homework also assigned, he was in his office and magically in his sitting room.

"Marion?!" Harry called before searching the ground floor and the garden when he didn't receive a response. He climbed the stairs and sighed when he found her passed out with an empty bottle of Firewhisky lying on the floor next to the bed. He checked her over gently before sitting on the bed and gently rubbing her back.

"Geroff!" she growled drunkenly and tried to push him away but her attempt was feeble. Instead her hand slid off his side and fell to the floor where she patted around for the empty bottle of liquor.

"Why?" he asked quietly, turning her to look at him. "I thought you swore to stay away from the stuff..."

"You don' unnershtand!" she slurred angrily at him, tears starting to form in her eyes.

"Come on; let's get you sobered up..." Harry said tenderly, reaching for the squirming woman.

She tried to wiggle out of his arms but eventually collapsed into him and sobbed into his shoulder. "Shh, it's ok," he cooed into her ear as he carried her downstairs. Harry set her on the couch and set to work on a sobering potion. Fifteen minutes later, she was drinking the concoction. Her bleary eyes cleared up and she slumped back into the sofa with a pitiful sigh.

Harry sat next to her and laid a hand gently on her knee. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly, frowning when she turned away from his gaze. Harry captured her chin and gently turned her to look at him. "Tell me what's wrong..." he said again, looking into eyes that were beginning to well with tears again. "You're angry because I volunteer to watch over the students then I come home and you're pissed on Ogden's... You know what this stuff does to you..."

Tears rolled down her cheeks unbidden but she couldn't pull her eyes from the compassion that was overflowing from his. She winced when he wiped the tears from her cheeks and she closed her eyes with a sigh. "I'm sorry," she said with a trembling voice.

"Apologizing won't get you out of anything this time..." Harry said gently, stroking her cheek with his thumb. She pressed her face into his hand and a new set of tears fell from the corners of her closed eyes. "Hey, did something happen?" he asked tenderly as he pulled her into a hug.

"Nothing's happened," her muffled voice replied from his chest.

"Then what's wrong?" He pulled back slightly so that he could kiss her forehead.

She didn't answer him with her words, but with a tender kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him into her. They sat on the sofa kissing passionately for an indeterminable amount of time when the clock signaled it was time for his extra lessons to begin.

"You better get to the school," she said softly, resting her head on his shoulder.

"We need to talk when I get back," Harry said quietly, kissing her temple before rising to his feet. "It's about why we're here..."

Tonks' eyes widened at his news but nodded her understanding. "I won't dip into the Firewhisky, I promise," she said softly. "See you when you get home?"

Harry nodded before stepping into the fireplace and disappearing. This time the hour dragged on for eternity, his hunger causing the apparent lengthening of the time. His mind was rarely on the class or his empty stomach because his fight with Tonks and how she'd been acting the past few weeks kept creeping to the forefront of his thoughts. Ten minutes before class ended, something occurred to him and he decided to call it a night.

"You're dismissed, great job, all of you!" he said with a smile, patting Dennis Creevey on the back. "I'll see you tomorrow night, enjoy the early evening!"

His students seemed happy at the prospect of an extra ten minutes to do as they pleased and left the room talking happily about their lesson. Harry smiled at their enthusiasm and after a quick check of the classroom, entered his office, locked it up and Flooed home.

He found Tonks sleeping soundly on the sofa and smiled at the sight. Harry had grown so accustomed to finding her there each night that he missed carrying her to bed. This time, however, he was famished and with another smile, found that she'd left sandwiches out for him. Harry gently kissed her forehead before devouring a few sandwiches and downing a glass of pumpkin juice.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Tonks asked sleepily from the sofa.

Harry glanced over and smiled. "I thought I'd eat before I carried you to bed tonight," he said as he finished off his sandwich. After dabbing at his mouth with the provided napkin, he sat next to her on the sofa, letting her lean into him as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she said quietly. "I shouldn't have yelled at you, you're doing your job and you're also working on the project..." she said and shook her head. "Don't deny it, James, I've seen you up late at night going over paperwork for the office..."

"You caught me..." he said with a soft chuckle. "I wasn't going to let you do everything."

"You're running yourself into the ground," she said as she gazed deeply into his eyes. "You need to get some rest."

"I will when Christmas holiday is here," Harry whispered as he kissed her temple. Tonks closed her eyes and leaned into his kiss, smiling lazily. "But we have news... you'll need to come to my office..."

Tonks slid off the sofa and waited for Harry to do the same, after traveling the Floo Network, he sat her down in the spare office chair and cast privacy charms on the walls, ceiling, and door. He went over everything that Albus had told him concerning the attack and that he'd already spoken with Moody using the secure crystal.

"So our assignment might be over this soon?" Tonks asked after a moment of thought.

"Only if our mark is present," Harry answered, also deep in thought. "I'm going to need you on that trip with me..." he said after a moment. "Is that ok?"

"Of course it's ok!" she replied incredulously. "We're partners and I'm not going to let you deal with anything like that alone!"

"I just wanted to make sure," Harry said cautiously.

Tonks rolled her hazel eyes and let out a sigh. "I told you I was sorry, James..." She thought for a moment then shook her head. "I really am sorry, Love," she whispered as she took his hands in hers. "I've been a giant prat and all you've done was your job..."

"And I keep leaving you by the wayside..." Harry said quietly. "Hermione asked if we were close..." he added hesitantly and noticed Tonks' wince at his words. "She was surprised that we were together..."

"We're not together," Tonks said quickly.

"I told her that we each needed someone to lean on," he said gently, "that during the war we had both been so lonely that we'd found each other..."

"But," Tonks whispered.

"She asked me if I loved you..." he continued, "And I told her I did, but not romantically and that you felt the same."

Tonks fidgeted in her seat then looked at their clasped hands. "Is that why she was so confused the other day?" she whispered quietly.

"It could be..." Harry replied, "but I might have been mistaken," he admitted, catching her gaze immediately when her head snapped up in surprise. "When I realized that I'd almost forgotten my promise to you, and the reality that Hermione didn't feel the same for me..." His eyes flicked to Tonks' lips then back to her eyes. "I realized that I *do* love you..."

Tears slipped from her eyes as his last words echoed in her ears then reverberated to her heart. "Y-you love me?" she asked in a tear-induced stutter. At his nod, she closed the distance between them, sealing his testimony with a kiss. "I love you too," she said with a trembling voice, feeling his warm arms wrap around her body and pull her into a crushing hug.

"Sorry I didn't catch on sooner," Harry whispered after a few minutes, "I didn't want to be blind of the fact again and lose you..."

"You're not going to lose me!" she said with a slight laugh, "but what about Hermione?"

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I still love her," he admitted, fully expecting Tonks to beat him about the head and neck in anger but when he opened his eyes he only saw her caring face watching him intently.

"I knew that," she said with a reassuring smile.

"I don't want to cut her out of my life again," Harry continued at her smile. "I hope you're not angry with that, because I'd still like to

exercise with her in the mornings and get together every once in a while...”

“Truthfully, I’ve been jealous of her,” Tonks said, looking away from him, “I know she’s really important to you but are... are you going to leave me when she starts to feel the same for you?” She looked to the ground and tears began to form in her eyes as the words she’d just spoken sank in. Tonks didn’t resist when Harry turned her face towards him and her tears increased at the seriousness in his eyes.

“I’m not like that,” Harry said quietly, “and I’m not going to leave you *if* she begins to feel the same way for me.” He cupped her cheek and pulled her into a tender kiss. “I love you,” he whispered against her lips, “and I always will...”

Her tears changed from those of sadness to joy at his words and she broke down in his arms. He could feel the relief flooding out of her and guessed that she’d had deeper feelings for him for quite some time now.

“It’s nice to not hide them, isn’t it, Love?” he asked as he slid back to wipe her tears away with gentle kisses.

“It is,” she said with a soft smile. “How long have you known?”

“That’s not important now, is it?” he asked with a grin. “What’s important is we can be open about how we feel now.”

“Why don’t we go home?” she asked with an immeasurable number of twinkles dancing gleefully in her eyes.

Harry didn’t say anything. He just stood, removed the privacy charms from the room and led her to the fireplace, where they magically transported to their house and made love for the first time.

"You're going to be late for your walk, Love!" Tonks called from the kitchen. Harry walked into the room and smiled at the woman before him. Her long, auburn hair was up in a bun and she was dressed in one of his old T-shirts. She smiled lovingly at him as he crossed the room and pulled her into a warm hug, kissing her passionately. "Mmm... I can definitely handle mornings like this..." she said as a goofy grin spread across her face. "You better remember to revert to normal before you go..."

Harry smiled sheepishly and kissed her once more before he reverted to his natural state and with another kiss, apparated to the Hogwarts gates. He couldn't help the smile that lit up his entire face as he nearly jogged to the Quidditch pitch and caught sight of Hermione on the way. She waved to him and jogged slightly to catch up, both of them meeting just outside the stadium.

"Good morning," she said with a bright smile, catching him in a bone-crushing hug reminiscent of the ones she'd reserved for him when they were younger.

Harry laughed, in far too good of a mood not to hug her back. He thought it wise not to break the news to her about his and Tonks' increased level of relationship so he just smiled instead. "Good morning!" he said with another joyous laugh. "Ready for a few laps today?"

"You are certainly in a good mood..." Hermione said with a laugh of her own as they began their new morning ritual. "You're positively glowing!"

Harry blushed and smiled even wider then looked to the ground as they completed the first portion of their warm up. "I *finally* had a good night!" he said, half-lying. "I've been working so hard that I hadn't had time to really enjoy an evening..."

"I hope you're not going into workaholic mode like you did in seventh year..." Hermione said concernedly. "Even though we shared the suite, I rarely saw you except in the library and classes!"

“Well, I had to work hard, didn’t I?” Harry said with a laugh. “If it weren’t for Snape, I would have even beat Malfoy!”

They began their walk, sharing tales of what they went through during the last two years at school, Harry wasn’t entirely comfortable with the conversation, but he knew it was time to get things out in the open. Truth be told, his mind wasn’t entirely on Hermione at the moment, suddenly missing his girlfriend entirely more than he could bear. Harry fought the urge to leave before they were finished, however, and smiled as he contemplated spending what time he did have before classes, during lunch, and after work with Tonks.

“Harry, there’s a Hogsmeade trip this Saturday,” Hermione said before they went their separate ways for the day. “Would you like to come along with me? I could introduce you to James and Marion...”

Harry smiled apologetically but shook his head. “I can’t this Saturday because we might be closing in on our man,” he explained quickly. “I’d really like to, but Tonks and I are going to be on stakeout duty most of the weekend and I won’t be able to join you on your walks until next Tuesday.”

Hermione nodded and looked to the ground. “That’s ok,” she said with a half-smile, “I’ll see you next week then?”

“Oh, I’ll be here each morning until Friday,” Harry said with a smile and she seemed to brighten a bit, “but the weekend is out...”

“I won’t lie, I’m a bit disappointed, but I understand,” she said quietly. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning then.”

He hugged her tightly and smiled as they parted. “See you tomorrow!” Harry called to her as he began to jog back to the gates. As soon as he crossed the wards, he was gone and found himself in the bedroom of his house. Tonks was waiting for him on the bed and smiled as he appeared in front of her.

“Miss me?” she asked teasingly as Harry’s eyes took in her nude body hungrily.

He changed into his James persona and smiled cheekily. "More than anything," he whispered before stripping off his clothes.

"Mmm... You're going to be late again..." she said huskily as he rolled to her side, panting.

"I don't care," he said with a grin, "but I guess I should get ready... save some water?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Get in the shower, Love!" she scolded playfully. "If I'm in there with you, you'll *definitely* be late!"

Harry laughed as he was summarily shoved towards the bathroom and Tonks giggled the entire way. He was quickly cleaned and dressed before he rushed to the sitting room. "I'll see you for lunch, Love." he said before pulling her tightly to him and kissing her deeply. "And you're welcome to visit between classes..." Harry added, wiggling his eyebrows.

"I've got to refill my potions anyway and thought I'd stop by Madam Pomfrey's this morning," she announced with a lopsided grin. "I'll see you when I'm done, ok?" Tonks laughed at the excited smile she received and she playfully pushed him towards the fireplace. "Get to work, Love, I'll see you later!"

Harry acquiesced and quickly found himself in his office. He'd just stepped from the fireplace when the bell rang and he grabbed his materials for the start of the day. He couldn't wait for a break in his classes, anticipating Tonks' arrival. Harry wasn't disappointed with the clock today as his third class ended, he noticed several of the sixth year boys stopped at the door, gawking at a beautiful woman with long, auburn hair.

"Out with you all," he said with a smile, "MacNafey, let my wife by, please!" The Ravenclaw student in question stepped aside immediately as every head still in the room turned in surprise to Harry.

"His wife?" He heard whispered in awe across the room as Tonks strolled confidently into Harry's office.

“Class has been dismissed,” Harry said again slightly more forcefully. That was enough for the remaining students to suddenly hurry out of the room, whispering madly amongst themselves.

“It seems you’ve got a fan club, Love,” Harry laughed as he stepped into the office, closing the door behind him then catching his girlfriend in a tight hug.

Tonks laughed as she kissed him and wrapped her arms around him in turn. “I really could get used to this...” she said dreamily as Harry kissed her neck.

“Did you get what you needed?” Harry asked after he’d collected himself enough to look into her lovely eyes.

“I did,” she said quietly, “but she examined me before she’d hand any over. Poppy kept asking why I needed the stuff if I were married...”

Harry laughed. “Well, she doesn’t know who we are so I’d guess that’s an honest question,” he said with a grin, giving in to his impulse to kiss her once again.

“Mmm... When’s your next class?” she asked as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“In four... no, three minutes...” he mumbled against her neck.

“I should get home then...” she said with a laugh. “Lunch is only a few hours away.”

“I can’t wait,” Harry said with a grin, running his hand down her side causing her to jump.

“James!” she hissed playfully. “I’ll. See. You. At. Lunch.” she said with a laugh, punctuating each word with a kiss.

Harry sighed and let her go, smiling even more broadly than before. “How did the examination go?” he asked while rifling through the papers on his desk.

“She’ll have a full analysis ready Saturday morning,” Tonks said with a smile. “There were too many bubotuber puss accidents coming in from Professor Sprout’s class. She’ll give me my refills afterwards.”

“So no sex?” he asked bluntly.

“We can, we just have to be careful, the last potion should wear off by Friday night so we’ll be just in time,” she explained with a laugh as the bell rang. “Get to class!” she said with one final kiss. “You’re insatiable, you know that?!”

Harry winked at her and smiled. “You have no idea, Love... See you in a few hours!”

The day sped by at an alarming rate, especially lunch where an hour just didn’t seem enough for Harry and Tonks to spend time together. After their midday meeting, time continued at its amazingly fast pace, reaching tea-time far faster than even he thought possible.

Hermione sat next to him at the professors’ table, Harry having beaten her to the Great Hall that evening, and they laughed and talked about what was happening at home and during classes.

The dueling club had been going marvelously well and this night was no exception as his pupils began to really shine in their practical lessons. Hermione arrived at nine for their rounds and they spoke more of their past before moving on to their hopes and dreams.

“I’d really like a family,” Harry said dreamily as they turned down another corridor. “I know I have Marion, but I really want children,” he whispered quietly.

“Harry might agree with you,” Hermione said wistfully. “He hasn’t had the easiest of childhoods. I, however, am an only child and the closest I’ve had to brothers and sisters were Harry and the Weasleys...”

“Do you see yourself with children?” Harry asked as they opened another broom closet to find it empty.

Hermione's face suddenly became pained and sadness settled in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?" he asked concernedly.

"No, you didn't," Hermione admitted quietly. "My mother had a difficult time conceiving and it was with great deal of effort that they even had me," she said not much louder. "There's a good chance that I'll have the same difficulties but I do want children... I just don't know if I can."

Harry put a comforting hand on her shoulder and smiled softly. "I'm sure you'll be able to," he said compassionately. "There's far better ways to increase that likelihood these days than when we were born."

Hermione looked into his eyes and smiled gratefully. "Thank you for letting me talk to you, I feel like I can tell you and Marion anything, you're very good friends."

"That's what we're here for," Harry said with a smile. "I think I hear Severus and Filius coming down the hall..."

No sooner had he made the observation than had Snape and Flitwick joined them in their usual meeting spot. With pleasantries spoken only between Harry, Hermione and the diminutive charms professor, the two groups of professors split off and went about their new tasks.

Harry walked Hermione to her door as he always had and waved goodnight. She disappeared behind her tapestry and Harry nearly ran to his office, locking it off and flooing home. To his delight, Tonks was sound asleep on the sofa and he wasted no time carrying the woman he loved to their bedroom. It turned out that she'd been pretending and the night went in the direction that he had hoped it would.

The week raced by and Harry soon found himself walking happily up the road to Hogwarts, arm-in-arm with his girlfriend, the morning of the first Hogsmeade visit. He had been to the school earlier that morning, teaching Hermione a new set of stretching exercises and coaching her first jog around the pitch. Harry had looked over her logbook and congratulated her on her progress, having slimmed down considerably from when he'd first met her after their long separation, and she was now in excellent health.

Harry and Tonks entered the castle and went their separate ways in the entrance hall, he heading for the staff room and Tonks to the hospital wing. They abstained from public displays of affection due to the rules of the school but that didn't keep them both from smiling brightly as they left in different directions.

"You're just in time, James," Dumbledore said with a smile as Harry entered the staff room. "We have everything in order, the Ministry has agents posted in the village and with the increased number of professors we should be able to keep the students safe."

Snape whispered something in the old wizard's ear before leaving for the dungeons and Albus smiled at Harry. "Thank you for offering your help and expertise, James," he said as they walked out together. "Is everything squared away with Marion?"

"You're welcome and she's going to join me on the trip, if that's alright," Harry said as they stepped onto the spiraling staircase that lifted them to the headmaster's office.

"That's quite fine," Dumbledore said as he closed the door and offered Harry a seat. "Severus just informed me that it seems our plans for this weekend were known and the attack has been canceled."

Harry nodded as a frown settled on his face. "I had a feeling that might happen, almost as if we have a leak..."

"He thought so too, but I'm not going to let our guard down. Things will go according to plan as a precaution." the old wizard said with a grim smile. "Keep your eyes open, there might be scouts lurking in the shadows..."

"I will, thanks for the update," Harry said absently as he rose to his feet. "I should meet Marion, she attracted the attention of several of the sixth years... who can tell how many know about my wife now..." he smiled at his old mentor before leaving the office.

Tonks was waiting patiently in the courtyard when Harry arrived. She had a nervous look on her face as she rocked on the balls of her feet.

“Hey, Love,” Harry said with a soft smile as he took her in his arms. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing,” she smiled sweetly at him, “I was just getting nervous waiting for you.”

He raised an eyebrow but smiled as he kissed her. “How did everything go?”

“Everything’s fine, I’ll get my potions via the Floo later today,” she said with a smile. “And you know what that means?” she added seductively in his ear.

Harry’s grin grew wide and he’d just given her a kiss when Hermione’s voice floated over to them.

“James, Marion!” she called with a wave. They broke apart with wide smiles on their faces, waving back at Hermione. “You’re both in a good mood,” she said with a smile.

“Just enjoying life,” Harry said with a shrug, feeling a ball of ice form in his stomach as he saw Hermione’s smiling face. “You seem equally happy...”

“More energetic, but I’ve been able to read, my classes are going well, Harry’s back in my life, though not as much as I’d like...” Hermione explained with her smile still firmly in place. “And I’ve got two great, new friends to keep me company in Hogsmeade!”

“That you do,” Tonks said with a laugh. “I think her energy might be a bit contagious!” Harry smiled at the two women in his life and saw the other professors start to file into the courtyard.

“How’s the decorating going?” Hermione asked with a modicum of interest to her voice.

“We haven’t started yet,” Tonks said with a shrug.

“You’ve started on the garden, Love.” Harry said with a wink. “But she’s right... we haven’t done anything inside yet...”

“Would you like to come over for tea tonight and see what I have planned?” Tonks asked with a grin. Hermione nodded with a returned smile as the students began to file into the courtyard.

“I don’t have anything planned for tonight,” Hermione said with a smile. “Should I bring anything?”

“Just yourself and a few color ideas,” Tonks returned happily.

The three of them followed the first group of students through the gates and into Hogsmeade. The morning and afternoon slipped by uneventfully as they each enjoyed an icecream treat just after lunch. The day went by without the predicted attack, as Snape had informed Dumbledore, and the last of the students were accounted for just before tea-time.

That evening went by just as quickly, their meal was a treat and the evening wore on with Tonks and Hermione talking animatedly about different wallpapers, colors, and draperies. Harry had relegated himself to listening and working on his lesson plans for the following Monday. He was also bogged down with more paperwork from his true profession and spent the majority of the evening at his desk.

“James, Love? Wake up...” Tonks said quietly as she gently shook his shoulder. “You’ll catch cold if you sleep at your desk, Love...”

Harry opened his eyes groggily. “What time is it?” he slurred, still overcome with sleep.

“It’s just past midnight,” she whispered with a kiss. “Come on to bed...”

Harry did as he was requested, slipping out of his clothes and slumping into his pillows with a yawn. Tonks followed afterwards and laughed softly, covering them both with their thick coverings.

“I love you...” she whispered, kissing him gently on the lips.

Harry smiled and pulled her to him, kissing her in return. “I love you too,” he whispered before his eyes shut of their own volition. He felt Tonks snuggle into him before he was sound asleep.

Harry woke with a start, looking at his clock and throwing his covers off of him, madly attempting to dress himself though he was still half asleep.

"What are you doing?" Tonks asked him crossly as he jostled the bed.

"I'm late for exercise with Hermione," Harry said hurriedly.

"You told her you wouldn't see her until Tuesday, remember?" Tonks said with a huff, falling back into her pillows and pulling the blankets over her body.

Harry stopped what he was doing immediately and sat on the bed. "I did, didn't I?" he asked rhetorically and shook his head. He undressed and slid back under the covers, slipped an arm around Tonks, and scooted closer to her. Taking a deep breath with his face buried in her hair he said, "Sorry about that..." followed by a slight chuckle.

"That's ok," Tonks said quietly and closed her eyes. "You can sleep in for once, why don't we do that?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea, Love," Harry mumbled as he kissed her neck. Sleep quickly overcame them both moments later.

A few hours later, Harry woke and patted the space next to him, only to find it empty. He opened his eyes, wondering where Tonks was, and glanced around the room to find it empty as well.

"Marion?" he called out tentatively to hear her respond from downstairs. Harry smiled and dressed in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt before heading downstairs to find Hermione and Tonks sitting at the kitchen table talking. "Morning!" Harry said cheerfully.

Hermione smiled at him and waved while Tonks glared at him.

"Is there something wrong?" he whispered as he bent to kiss her on the cheek. Tonks replied with a fake smile and shook her head. Harry looked at her curiously before pouring himself a cup of tea.

"We were just talking about the colors that would go well in the kitchen," Hermione supplied with a smile. "Did you know that the distance it takes to jog around the pitch twenty times is exactly the same distance it takes to get here?"

Harry laughed. "I hadn't considered that," he admitted.

"I was wondering... Would you be interested in meeting my friend Harry on Tuesday?" Hermione asked with a hopeful grin. "I was just telling Marion that I've been trying to get him over here to meet you but his job has him on a pretty tight timetable. The only time I could get him here would be in the morning..."

"If it's fine with him, I don't see why not..." Harry said with a nervous smile. Tonks closed her eyes when Hermione smiled at the news.

"I'll owl him when I get back to the school then," Hermione said excitedly. "Are we still on for lunch, Marion?" Hermione asked with a grin and a raised eyebrow.

"Ah, a girls' day out?" Harry asked cautiously, watching Tonks' reaction intently.

"If you don't mind, James..." Tonks said sweetly. "Would it be ok if I spend some time with Hermione?"

Harry caught the minor irritation in her voice but smiled to keep Hermione, who looked to him hopefully, unaware of the friction. "I don't mind at all," he said cheerfully. "I was going to walk around town anyway... maybe I'll meet you on your way back to the house."

"Great!" Hermione said with a wide smile. "See you back here at eleven-thirty?"

"That's fine," Tonks said with a smile as the two women left the table for the front room. Harry watched as Tonks acted cheerful for Hermione's sake and he braced himself for the tongue-lashing he knew was coming his way.

Hermione waved to him from the door and he waved back with a smile. He had no sooner set his mug down than Tonks stormed into the kitchen.

"What did I do?" Harry asked before she opened her mouth to say anything. "Was it getting up to exercise with my friend like I have for the past two weeks or was it getting back into bed with you and sleeping in?"

Tonks' glare burned into him and he saw the anger boiling behind her hazel eyes. He looked at her and crossed his arms, waiting for her to explode, but to her credit, she calmed herself down and took a deep breath. "I was angry this morning, yes," she said calmly, "and I would have been alright had you not promised that you'd meet yourself Tuesday morning..."

"I've got that covered," Harry said with a smile. "I have to call in a favor, but there won't be any problems with me meeting myself and we'll both know what's happening..." He grinned devilishly.

"Two places at once?" Tonks asked skeptically when her eyebrows shot up. "You aren't..."

"I can," Harry said with mischievous grin then bent to her ear and whispered something that made her blush a vivid, deep red.

"Don't screw this up!" she hissed, though a small smile played at her lips and her blush persisted well throughout the morning whenever she looked at him.

Hermione arrived at the exact time agreed upon and the two women went about their day in Hogsmeade. Harry, however, had a few calls he had to make to a few friends that owed him favors. Things went well for the young man and he found himself walking around Hogsmeade enjoying some window shopping, analyzing his life and where it was headed.

His mind was mainly on Hermione and Tonks. He could tell that Tonks was still jealous of his friend and it pained him that she was acting like people did when he was back in school. Until the schism in their friendship that following school year that is.

Harry began mental lists between the two, comparing their qualities, their pros and cons and realizing that Hermione didn't love him, not in the way that he wanted her to, but Tonks, she had professed her love. Both women had been close to him for some time, Hermione just recently making her way back into his life. He shook his head, trying to piece everything together when something sparkly caught his eye. He turned towards the large, plate-glass window and his eyes fell on the perfect ring.

"She'd love that ring," he said breathlessly as he took in the twin diamonds and gold band. Harry caught sight of the price tag and frowned in thought, trying to calculate how long he'd have to save his paycheck to buy it. His mind made up, he entered the store and had it put on hold for him, setting down an initial payment and smiling to himself as he left the store.

Harry was back at the house, smiling as he cooked. He made a bit extra just in case Hermione happened to be with his girlfriend when they returned.

"James, could you give us a hand?" Tonks called from the front door. Harry bustled out of the kitchen wearing his apron and took the bags out of Tonks' and Hermione's arms.

"Good lord, did you buy the entire store?" he asked with a laugh as he set the bags down in the sitting room and helped them with two more trips.

"There's a lot to decorate!" Tonks said with a sarcastic grin. "I'm tired of looking at shades on the windows and white walls!"

Harry laughed and caught her in a hug, kissing her tenderly as she smiled. "I've got tea almost ready, are you two hungry?"

"Famished!" Tonks said with a smile. "You're welcome to join us, Hermione."

Hermione smiled and accepted the invitation eagerly. Afterwards, the three friends sat in the sitting room chatting about everything and anything but the conversation kept swinging back to the colors Tonks and Hermione picked for the sitting room.

“Just as long as I don’t have to look at pink walls around my desk, I’m fine with whatever you want to do,” Harry said with a laugh.

“We won’t touch your precious walls,” Tonks said with a faux sneer then laughed when Harry’s face fell.

The evening went by quickly, Hermione excusing herself so she could rest for classes the next day, leaving Harry and Tonks alone. They retired rather early as well, Harry exhausted from the amount of paperwork he’d been working on and Tonks from the amount of shopping she’d done. They were sound asleep quickly and the next morning reveling in the fact that Harry could sleep in.

"James, could you get the door?" Tonks called from the kitchen as she plated breakfast for four.

James Baker trotted down the stairs to answer the refreshed knocking coming from the front door and opened it with a smile.

"Good morning, James!" Hermione said with a wide smile. "I bring company this time!"

"Hello, Mr. Baker," Harry said with a smile, offering his hand for James to shake.

"It's nice to finally meet the famous Harry Potter! And please, call me James," he said with a smile. "Don't worry... Hermione's praise comes from your other qualities, not your scar."

"Is everyone in the mood for breakfast?" Tonks said with a smile from the kitchen. "James and Hermione don't have much time before classes start..."

"Harry, I'd like you to meet my wife, Marion," James said, smiling as he pulled Tonks forward to shake the hand of The-Boy-Who-Lived.

"Very nice to meet you, Harry," Tonks said with a grin, blushing slightly as he shook her hand. "Come on into the kitchen, I've got breakfast waiting..."

The four of them sat at the table and enjoyed Tonks' improved cooking prowess. "Thank you for the lessons, Hermione," Tonks said with a shy grin. "I would be burning the house down otherwise..."

"I didn't know you were taking cooking lessons," James said with a crooked smile. "That explains a lot, actually..."

"You're so bad, James!" Tonks said with a blush and slapped his arm playfully causing the others to laugh.

Harry looked at his watch and frowned before smiling apologetically to Hermione. "I've got to get back to Tonks, Hermione," he said with a small shrug.

"Oh," Hermione checked the clock quickly and nodded. "I should get to the school... I still need to clean up for the day."

"Same here, it seems," James said with a slight smile. "I guess I'll see you at Hogwarts then, Hermione." He stood with everyone and walked Harry and Hermione to the door. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Harry," he said with an extended hand.

"Same here," Harry said as they shook hands followed by James hugging Hermione farewell.

"Take care, James, I'll see you in a little while," Hermione said, pulling out of the hug and hugging Tonks in turn. The women laughed in their own ways before pulling apart. Tonks finished the goodbyes by shaking Harry's hand before the couple left their house and the door was locked.

"Race you upstairs!" James said with a wide smile as Tonks bolted to their bedroom.

"I win!" Harry said as she ran in to see him appear in front of her.

"This is going to be strange..." she said with a deep blush creeping in her cheeks as James entered behind her.

"Ready?" he asked cheekily, sweeping Tonks up in his arms without warning and carrying her to the bed.

"JAMES!" she squealed and playfully hit his chest.

"I'll get the shirt?" Harry said with a crooked smile.

"And I'll get her skirt?" James said with an equally crooked smile.

Tonks didn't know what to do so she sat on the edge of the bed with her eyes closed.

"Can't you use the Time-Turner again?" she whined again as they crawled into bed later that night. "I'll be good..."

Harry laughed and shook his head. "I had to turn it back in before my friend got in trouble," Harry explained as he wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. "It seems that you'll be the only woman who knows what it's like to be with two of me..."

"I'm spoiled now..." she huffed as he kissed her forehead.

"I'm sorry, Love, but it was a one time only deal..." Harry explained softly, a smile playing across his lips. "Besides, I don't want to share you with anyone like that again, even if it's me..."

Her eyes lit up at his proclamation and a smile crept across her face. "You mean that?" she asked quietly, smiling even wider at his nod. "Mr. Baker, you've just gotten lucky once again today..." she purred as she slid atop him and nibbled at his neck.

It was early the next morning that a very tired, yet satisfied Harry Potter rolled out of bed and threw on his jogging clothes. "I'll be home for breakfast, Love," he whispered with a kiss as he reverted to his normal form. "See you in an hour."

"Remember the story," she mumbled quietly, pulling the covers over her shoulder and snuggling into the pillows.

"I know," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me," she commanded groggily. "Don't be late..."

"I won't," he said reassuringly and apparated to the school gates. Hermione was on her way to him as he slipped onto the grounds and waved.

"You ready for another jog to James' and Marion's?" Hermione asked with a bright smile.

"I can jog there, but I can't stay for breakfast," Harry said apologetically. "We're going deeper undercover and I need the time to get ready."

"Deeper undercover?" Hermione asked with a frown as they stretched their muscles for the jog down to the Bakers' home. "How long will you be away?"

Harry sighed and shrugged. "I don't know, a few days, a few months?"

"Will you be able to run with me?" she asked quietly before they started on their morning trip.

"I know I'll be able to when Christmas holidays are over," he said with a shrug. "But other than that, I can't make any promises other than sending Hedwig to let you know when I can get away..."

Hermione nodded, deep in thought as they started their run. It took them a good amount of time to run the route that Hermione had laid out to equal the Quidditch pitch laps and still end at the Bakers' house. They continued in companionable silence for half the trip before Hermione looked over at him.

"Am I pushing you away, Harry?" she asked, a blush forming on her face as the question left her lips.

"Of course not!" Harry said with a shake of his head then slowed to a stop. "What gave you that idea?"

"Well, until the other day, you've been refusing my invitations to visit my new friends... though with your hours, I can see how difficult it is to get away," she looked to the ground and fidgeted slightly as he walked up to her.

"I know we don't spend as much time together as we'd like, Hermione," Harry said quietly, "but an hour a day is a good start. It's not the best, but we're getting back into our friendship again, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are," Hermione said quickly, "but I'm not ready to move to the next level yet..."

Harry laid a hand on her shoulder and smiled gently. "I'm not asking you to, Hermione."

She nodded quietly. "I would still like to spend more time with you... James and Marion are great, but I feel like a third wheel sometimes. I see what they have and I..." She looked up and shrugged helplessly. "I get jealous."

"You'll have what they do one day," Harry said with a gentle smile, the guilt that suddenly lodged itself in his throat hidden from her view. "You said you're not ready to be with me that way, just give it time and you'll feel better."

Hermione half smiled and shrugged. "Well, we should get going... I'm going to be late for classes if I don't get a move on..."

Harry glanced at his watch and winced. "Tonks is going to rip my arms off if I'm late."

They shared a nervous laugh and the two of them finished their run.

"See you later, Hermione, take care!" Harry said with a wave and disappeared. He had just appeared in the bedroom, startling Tonks who had just stepped from the bathroom. "Sorry I'm late!" he said quietly as he shifted to his undercover identity. "Hermione and I had a chat that took longer than I expected..."

"I assume that's her at the door?" Tonks asked nonplussed.

Harry nodded and stripped, bolting for the shower. He heard her grumble as she got dressed and rushed from the room to answer the door. He was showered and dressed quickly, running down the stairs in a rush to get Hermione to the school with enough time for her to get ready.

"Sorry about that, overslept," he said quickly, kissing Tonks on the cheek and letting Hermione through the Floo. "I'll see you at lunch, Love," he said quickly before following his friend to his office.

"Thanks for letting me use your Floo connection, James," Hermione said with a grateful smile as he cleaned himself off.

"Not a problem, you need to get ready for classes and you're running behind schedule," Harry said as he set down his briefcase.

"You and Marion are such wonderful friends," Hermione said with a smile and a tight hug. She kissed him on the cheek and left his office with a wave.

He shut his door and sat in the chair at his desk, sighing as he buried his face in his hands. "WHAT WAS THAT?!" Tonks screeched from the fireplace. Harry nearly jumped out of his socks at the sudden appearance of her large, green, flaming head.

"What was what?" Harry asked defensively.

"You know what I'm talking about!" she said angrily. "You left your lessons folder on the desk and I was just sending it to you!"

The folder in question slid across the floor to land at his feet and Harry looked at the irate face still lingering in the fireplace. "She was thanking me for letting her use the Floo," he explained as he scooped up the file. "She hugged me and kissed my cheek, you know how Hermione is with her friends..."

Tonks rolled her eyes and glared at Harry for a moment before shaking her head. "I'll see you at lunch," she said curtly and disappeared from the office.

"Could this day get any worse?" he asked exasperatedly under his breath as a knock came at the door. "Come in..." he said wearily and turned to see Snape hanging in the doorway. "Yes, Severus?" he asked quietly, looking up at the man and sneering back in his mind.

"Staff meeting at noon," he drawled with a sneer firmly planted on his waxy face then left the office in a flourish.

Harry shook his head in disbelief and found himself looking at an angry Tonks in their sitting room. "I won't be home for lunch... I will after rounds tonight, staff meeting at noon," he explained as her face

seemed to get redder. "I can come home between classes if you'd like to talk."

"No, that's fine," she said, closing her eyes in an attempt to calm herself. "I'll see you when you get home tonight."

"The bell just rang," Harry said irritably. "I'll see you later."

The day dragged slower than he'd imagined it could. Classes were uneventful, the staff meeting was about mundane business and Hermione was quiet through most of their patrol. She'd mentioned Harry having to go deeper undercover and she'd be jogging alone until after the Christmas holidays and that led the conversation to where it currently was.

"What do you and Marion have planned?" she asked as they turned down another corridor.

"I was thinking about surprising her with a trip," Harry said with a smile. "I've been so busy with work since we've arrived that I haven't had enough time to spend alone with her in a relaxing sort of way. Do you have any plans?"

"I'm spending them with my parents," Hermione said with a wide smile. "I haven't spent Christmas with them in several years and I think it's time I remedy that. Have you gone shopping yet?"

"We were planning on doing our shopping Christmas Eve," Harry replied truthfully. "Just to get out and enjoy the carols and atmosphere if nothing else... have you?"

"Not yet," Hermione replied with a shrug. "I was thinking about going out then as well, though I've already got presents for Harry and the Weasleys I care about."

"Maybe we'll see you in Diagon Alley then," Harry said with a grin. "We could tap the Leaky Cauldron for a butterbeer and stew after we're done shopping..."

"I'd like that," Hermione said with a slight smile. Their conversation ended when Snape and Filch caught up with them and the shift

changed hands. They parted ways at the entrance to her quarters and Harry Floored back to the house after he'd reached his office.

Tonks was sitting on the sofa, wide awake and staring at the flames as he stepped into the room.

"Hey," he said tenuously. "Are you still mad at me?"

"No," she sighed, standing up and crossing over to him. She pulled him into a hug and laid her head on his chest. "I'm sorry I was so grumpy today..."

Harry caught her up in his arms and let out a low whistle. "Grumpy?" He stopped himself before getting into too much hot water and instead kissed the top of her head. "I won't be jogging with Hermione until after the holidays," he informed his girlfriend quietly.

"*After* the holidays?" Tonks asked with wide eyes. "I thought we agreed on just a few weeks?"

"We did, but I want to spend more time with the woman I love," he said with a slight smile. "I was also hoping we could spend a week of that time on a warm beach somewhere... As far as I know, we never had a honeymoon, did we?"

A grin crossed Tonks' face as she thought about the background of their undercover identities and it transformed into a wide smile. "No, we haven't..."

"You're *undercover* and you're asking for a *joint holiday*?" Moody growled at his two top agents.

"Neither of us has had a chance to relax since the war, Moody," Tonks replied matter-of-factly.

"Since I've been out of training, we've both taken what, three days each for personal days?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Neither of us has taken holiday and I think the stress is getting to the both of us."

“We’ll even go in our undercover identities,” Tonks added with a shrug. “Give the illusion that the Bakers are taking a week to vacation over the Christmas holidays.”

Moody eyed the two suspiciously, his magical eye spinning lazily in its socket. He looked over their request forms, noting that everything was in order and let out a sigh. “We can have two agents there before you leave but we’re going to need your contact information,” he grumbled, obviously in a disapproving manner, but they’d made good points that he couldn’t refute.

Harry and Tonks smiled brightly and after giving their supervisor their contact information, they left to enjoy the rest of the weekend.

“Could you get the door, Love?” Tonks yelled from the bedroom. “It might be Hermione!”

Harry left the kitchen for the front room and smiled at his fellow professor who was standing at the door with a bag of groceries.

“Sorry I’m early,” Hermione said with a smile. “I thought I’d stop by the market for tonight.”

“You don’t have to cook for us again,” Harry said with a laugh as he took the bag from her. “You’ve been helping us decorate this place for the past few months...”

“And you’re doing it all the Muggle way,” Hermione returned with a snort of laughter. “I don’t know why...”

“I’ve always wanted to decorate the Muggle way,” Tonks said with a smile as she stepped into the room. “It makes it more personal.”

“Are you alright?” Hermione asked concernedly as she walked to her friend for a hug. “You’re not looking too well...”

“I think I’m coming down with the flu or something,” Tonks said queasily, “I haven’t felt this ill since I was younger.”

Harry returned to the room and helped his girlfriend to a chair, then left and returned with a cool glass of water. “That should help, Love,”

he said comfortingly as he stroked her hair. "She's not been feeling well for the past few weeks, Madam Pomfrey said that she'd have to wait it out, drink plenty of fluids, and eat healthy foods..."

"Mmm, do we have anymore chocolate left?" she asked with a hopeful smile. "It's always made me feel better when I was under the weather before."

"We're all out," Harry said with a smile. "Why don't you two have a seat and I'll run out to Honeydukes?"

Tonks smiled brightly at Harry as Hermione sat on the sofa. "Thanks, Love," she whispered and kissed him tenderly on the lips.

"Be right back!" Harry said with a smile. "Help yourself to anything in the kitchen if you're thirsty or hungry, Hermione."

"I'm fine, but thanks," Hermione said with a laugh.

Harry left quickly, smiling to himself as he made a slight detour toward the jewelry store. He thanked the shopkeeper as he made the final payment on the ring he'd set aside and pocketed the velvet box after he left. His trip to Honeydukes went just as easily and he made sure to buy far more than what they had previously.

"I'm back!" he said with a grin as he stepped into the sitting room, only to find Hermione unloading the paint for their project for the day. "Is Marion...?"

"Upstairs? Yes, she didn't feel well and had to make a run to the loo," Hermione explained with a glance up the stairs. "I mentioned stew for tea and she went green in the face..."

"It's something about beef and chicken that really sets her off," Harry explained as he stowed the chocolate bars in the refrigerator. "She's fine with most fish and vegetables however, does that put a damper on tea?"

"No, I can pick up some tuna steaks instead," Hermione said with a shrug. "The rest was mash and vegetables, nothing else..." Without a

word, she grabbed her pocketbook and smiled. "I'll be right back with those steaks."

"I'll hide the meat," Harry said with a grin. "No need for her to see it and spend all afternoon in the loo..."

The rest of the afternoon, Tonks seemed to be fine, though queasy a few times while they painted the sitting room.

"When are you going on holiday?" Hermione asked as they stood back and admired their handiwork. "You were right, Marion, burgundy and hunter green really made the room more comfortable!"

Tonks smiled at the compliment. "We're spending the week before Christmas somewhere warm," she said with a smile to Harry. "James won't tell me where we're going yet."

"It's a surprise!" he said with a laugh. "You know that it's warm there, no need to spoil the rest..."

"Will you be back in time for Christmas Eve?" Hermione asked hopefully. "My parents and I would like to invite you over for our traditional Christmas feast."

Harry looked at Tonks, a soft smile playing at his lips.

"I don't see why not," Tonks said with a loving smile directed at Harry, "neither of us have spent Christmas Eve with friends or family in a while..."

Hermione brightened at the words and hugged Tonks tightly. "Thank you! I didn't want to be without friends over the Holiday," she explained afterwards. "I've only had my ex-boyfriend since we'd finished Hogwarts..."

"Well, now you have us and your parents," Harry said with a smile as he set a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Not to mention Harry..."

"Harry won't be here this year either," Hermione said with a sad look in her eyes. "His job as an Auror is pretty demanding on his time. I

haven't seen him for the past few months because of it," she said with a sigh, turning away as a tear fell to her cheek.

"I'm sorry that you miss him," Tonks said quietly, rubbing Hermione's back. "You'll see him again, won't you?"

"After the holidays," she replied with a sigh. "I didn't realize just how much I wanted him back in my life until I couldn't see him again," she admitted with a shrug.

Tonks looked to Harry who had started feeling another bubble of guilt rise in his throat. "We should clean up if we're going to eat tonight," Harry said with a soft smile. "Hermione, why don't you take a shower and I'll take care of the sitting room?"

She nodded and smiled in return. "Sorry for that," she said simply and grabbed her bag on the way up the stairs. A few minutes later, they heard the shower start and Harry slumped into the sofa with a sigh.

"It looks like she's taken with you," Tonks said quietly as she sat in the chair next to the fireplace. "Is this the end then?" she asked in a raspy voice.

Harry looked up at his girlfriend and crossed to her, kneeling on the floor in front of her. "Look at me," he said gently but she continued to look at the floor, ignoring his request. Harry sighed and tenderly turned her face to his. "I love you," he said reassuringly, "and I'm not going to up and leave you because she might be coming around..."

"But you've been in love with her for so long..." Tonks whispered as tears began to well in her eyes. "How can I compete with that kind of devotion?"

Harry took her face in his hands and kissed her softly. "I can't wait forever for someone who might not see me as anything more than a friend," Harry said compassionately. "Yes, I've been in love with her for a long time, but I'm in love with you now and as long as you want me in your life, I'm there. I'm not going to leave you for a pipe dream, Love," he explained quietly, "and that's what she is, a pipe dream... Do you love me?"

Tonks nodded silently, the tears cascading down her cheeks uncontrollably. "Yes," she whispered, averting her eyes again.

"Look at me," he commanded softly and her gaze returned to his eyes. "I'm not going to leave you, ok?"

Tonks nodded again and hugged him tightly. "I'm sorry I'm so jealous," she whispered into his ear. "I can't help it... you two have so much history..."

"History as *friends*," Harry corrected. "You and I have a history too, and it's one that I'm happy to have. I'm not going to throw that all away for a dream..."

"Is everything ok?" Hermione asked from the bottom of the stairs, freshly showered and dressed.

"Oh, sorry," Tonks said with an apologetic smile as she wiped her cheeks. "Everything's fine, just a talk..."

"Do you want me to go?" Hermione asked as she started to collect her things. "If you need privacy, there's no problem..."

"No, no, that's fine," Tonks said hurriedly and stopped their friend. "We've already said what we need to, why don't you start on tea and we'll finish cleaning up the room?"

"If you're sure..." Hermione said comfortingly.

Harry nodded as he stepped up behind Tonks and placed his hands on her shoulders. "We're sure, Hermione."

With a hug to Tonks, Hermione went into the kitchen and started about her business while Harry and Tonks magically cleaned up the room. Tea went off without a hitch and it was late into the night when Hermione left for the school.

"It looks like she was crying as well," Tonks said with a sigh as they watched her disappear from the street.

“Only one more week until the Christmas holidays,” Harry said absently as he wrapped his arms around his girlfriend. “What have you been eating?” he asked with a smile as he rubbed her belly.

“What?” Tonks asked quickly, taking his hands in hers. “Are you saying I’m fat?!”

Harry’s face paled instantly and shook his head vehemently. “No!” he replied immediately. “It’s just...”

“Just *what?*” Tonks hissed at him.

“Nothing, forget I said anything...” he said quickly, backing away from the angering woman.

She raised an eyebrow at him and shook her head. “It’s ok,” she said after a sigh. “I’m kind of drained. I think I’ll go to bed early.”

“Alright,” Harry said quietly as she came in for a hug. “I’ll be up in a little while. I just have to prepare for classes.” They kissed for a moment before Tonks went up the stairs to bed. Harry shook his head in confusion before starting on his lesson plans for the final week of the term. “Women,” he whispered to himself as he sat at his desk.

The last week before holidays started went by in a blur for Harry as he and Tonks geared up for their trip to the Caribbean. His girlfriend was still completely unaware of where they’d be going even though she’d taken to asking him several times a day. Regardless, after their talk, Tonks’ mood had improved dramatically and no longer became upset when Harry spent time with Hermione. He’d been able to jog with her on two occasions and his guilt at spending time with his girlfriend and not with Hermione lessened after spending more romantic time with Tonks.

Hermione’s mood, however, had swung from happiness when Harry was with her in the morning to showing clear signs of depression when on their patrols. He knew what was bothering her, but had asked anyway, considering he was her friend in both personas. Her reply was always the same, that she was fine and just wanted to spend more time with Harry.

The last day of classes slipped by uneventfully and Hermione was over for tea, which had become a tradition of sorts on weekends.

"Has he told you where you're going yet?" Hermione asked with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Not yet!" Tonks said with a faux scowl, the bright twinkles belying any real anger she may have felt.

"I'm right here," Harry said with a laugh. "She'll find out when we get there, no sooner than that!"

"I should be going," Hermione said as a sad look flashed in her eyes. She looked at Harry and smiled softly, "Take good care of her."

"I will," he replied with a smile. "You have a good week, Hermione." He stood and hugged his friend tightly. "Things will turn out fine, trust me on that," he whispered as he glanced to Tonks.

Hermione smiled wanly and hugged Tonks before stepping out into the cold evening air. "See you in a week! Take care!" She waved before disappearing, leaving Harry to close the door.

"I hope she'll be alright," Tonks said quietly as she looked out the window.

Harry caught her from behind and hugged her gently. "She will be," he said as he kissed her neck, "she needs time to heal after everything that's gone on."

"When do we leave?" Tonks asked as she turned around to return the hug.

"Whenever you're ready," Harry said with a smile. "We'll be traveling via portkey and if I'm not mistaken..." He raised his hand and two suitcases floated to them, landing quietly on the floor. "We're already packed."

"You packed for me too?" Tonks asked in surprise. "But when?"

“While you were sleeping the other day,” Harry said with a laugh. “I told you the trip would be a surprise... now, let’s grab those handles and be off, shall we?”

Tonks grinned and after a brief kiss grabbed the handle of her luggage. Her eyes went wide as she disappeared, leaving Harry to laugh and follow suit. He locked the doors and grabbed his bag to the familiar pull at his navel and he stumbled onto a beach with crystal blue waters.

“James, it’s so beautiful!” she squealed in delight and caught him in a bone-crushing hug.

“I thought you might like it,” Harry said with a laugh. “I know how you hate the winter...”

“I love you, you know that?” she asked as she came in for a kiss.

“And I love you,” Harry replied, reveling in the fact that he adored the woman in his arms. “Let’s go find our hut...”

The first day was spent acclimating themselves to the heat by not wearing any clothes and exercising in a most romantic manner on several occasions. Once the sun had gone down, Harry and Tonks spent a few hours watching the stars from a hammock just outside their door. They made love under the stars and woke when the first rays of dawn struck their nude forms the next morning.

Neither had actually been on holiday before, Harry having gone through school to fight Voldemort then directly into Auror training, and Tonks spending most of those early years as one of Harry's guardians, keeping him safe. After Harry's completion of training, and many times during it, they were partnered and sent on mission after mission without reprieve.

Those thoughts behind him, Harry smiled happily at the woman who was running down to the crystal blue water for a quick morning swim where she turned and waved to him before a wave caught her from behind. He laughed heartily at the sight and ran down to help her up and join in the fun. For the first time in Harry's life, he felt more complete than he had ever been, save when he was with his best friends, but that relationship had ended far too soon for his liking. When Hermione returned to his life, he was confused and though she knew how he felt, she still remained at arms length.

The more time he'd spent with Tonks, a woman who loved him in return and understood how he felt in the same way that Hermione did, the more he realized how lucky he was. Harry Potter was elated to have won the heart of the woman who was now rolling in the sand and kissing him passionately under the hot, Caribbean sun.

Over the months since they admitted how they felt, Harry had realized how much he wanted Tonks in his life, not as a partner for sexual purposes, not as merely a friend; Harry realized that he wanted this woman to be his wife and the ring he'd found that day in Hogsmeade solidified that belief.

It was the last night of their trip, the couple having enjoyed another relaxing day basking in the sun and frolicking in the ocean surf. Tonks

was back at their hut getting ready to go out as Harry waited for her outside. He was nervously playing with the small velvet box that he'd purchased a few weeks ago and wondering what was taking her so long to meet him.

“Love?” he called into the hut as he walked up to the door. “Are you ready to go yet?” Silence was the reply he received and Harry frowned in concern. He gripped his wand and slowly opened the door. Nobody was in the common room and he looked to the light in the bedroom. “Marion?”

No answer issued forth so he crept to the bathroom quietly to make sure that nobody was hiding there. With nobody lurking in the shadows, he turned his attention to the bedroom. His eyes widened in surprise and he dropped his wand when he saw who was waiting for him.

“H-Hermione?” he asked incredulously. “Where’s Marion? Why are you here?” He noticed she’d been crying and walked over to her cautiously. “What’s wrong?”

“Is this what you really want?” Hermione asked quietly, motioning to herself.

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked bewildered. “You’re my friend...”

Hermione looked to him with anger burning in her eyes and fresh tears flowing down her cheeks as she shoved a piece of parchment in his chest. “You know perfectly well what I’m talking about!” she yelled at him. “Is this what you want? This?!” she said angrily and motioned to herself.

Harry looked from the crumpled paper to his screaming friend. "What's gotten in to you?" he asked in confusion. Taking a step back he glanced at the paper.

My Dearest Harry,
I'm sorry if sending you this letter gets you into trouble, I know Hedwig stands out but she wouldn't let me use any of the school owl/s...

I hope your mission is going well, school just let out for us and I'll be spending Christmas with my parents for the first time in five years! I hoped that you could be there with me, and James and Marion have accepted an invitation for my family's Christmas feast... I've got to stop this rambling business. Remember when I asked you to be patient with me? I know it hurt you to hear those words and I still need time, but I really need to talk with you, Harry...

Harry stopped reading and looked to his friend. "Why did you bring this to me yourself?"

"I didn't!" Hermione growled and pointed to the snowy owl perched in the corner. "Hedwig just brought that by!"

Something in her voice caught Harry's attention and he looked at Hermione with a glint of irritation. "Why?" he asked quietly, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. "Why change into Hermione when I've told you that *I love you*?" His voice trembled with anger and he threw the now crumpled parchment to the floor.

"You don't really want me!" Tonks said, reverting to her normal self and wiping away the tears on her cheeks. "You've been *in love* with *her* for six years!"

"*Marion*," Harry said warningly as Tonks reluctantly morphed into her alter ego, "how many times do I have to tell you that I love *you*?"

"You read the letter!" Tonks said sadly. "She wants you... Can't you see that?"

"And I want you," Harry said tenderly, pulling her into his arms. She didn't resist but didn't hug him in return. "Love," he whispered in her ear, "*she* was too slow this time; I've already made up my mind..." Tonks pulled away and looked to the floor. "I chose you," he whispered as he cupped her chin and lifted her face so their eyes would meet.

She smiled slightly then tears began to fall again as her smile fell. "I have to tell you something, Harry," she whispered as she reverted to her normal self. Harry's eyes went wide for a moment before casting

every privacy spell he knew on the room. He morphed to his natural form and motioned for her to sit on the bed, which she did.

"I have something to talk to you about as well..." he said seriously, shoving his hand in his pocket and gripping the box that lay dormant within its depths. Tonks looked up at him when the tone in his voice changed.

"What is it?" she asked quietly, seeing the look in his face.

"We've known each other for what, six years now?" He asked as he began to pace before her. She nodded though he had asked the question rhetorically. "We've been through more together than any two people should have. My friends, when I was in school, being the only ones who shared as much as we do, but we've shared so much more..."

"I've lost count of the number of assignments where you and I were paired together as a married couple or as teenagers who were dating in that one Muggle school... Three years ago we stopped being partners or just friends and became more. I-I didn't know what to label it at the time, it just felt wonderful to have someone in my life, to comfort me and hold me like you did..."

"You did the same for me, Harry," Tonks said quietly, her heart beating faster and faster with each step that Harry took. The entire time her face grew more and more confused as his speech continued. "What are you trying to say?"

He saw the surprise in her eyes when he stopped abruptly in front of her and settled down on one knee. Harry withdrew a black, velvet box from his pocket and presented it to her. "What I'm trying to say is..." he said shakily as his trembling hand lifted the lid to reveal the dual diamond engagement ring inside, "Nymphadora Tonks, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

Harry's world suddenly slowed to a dreaded silence that matched the pace of a snail on valium. The woman he'd just proposed to was sitting in front of him with wide eyes and a gaping mouth, clearly bewildered at the turn of events that had just unfolded.

“W-what?” she whispered dumbly, the ringing silence that had settled in his ears was wiped away by the booming sound of her voice.

“I just asked if you would marry me,” Harry said even more nervously than when he’d asked the first time. “I know that it’s sudden, we’ve only been ‘together’ for a few months...” he started to mumble incoherently.

“Yes.”

“And with everything that’s going on...” He looked to her watering eyes as he stopped talking. “Did you just say?”

Tonks nodded. “But before we go any further, I have to talk to you about something important,” she said seriously. “Decide if you still want to marry me afterwards...” Harry nodded quietly and didn’t move, waiting for Tonks to continue. She cleared her throat and looked to the ring that was glittering in the box, tempting her to keep her mouth shut, but she sighed instead. “Promise me you won’t be angry,” she said quietly, not meeting his gaze.

“What is it?” he asked.

Tonks looked him in the eyes. “Promise,” she pleaded, taking his hand in hers.

Harry gulped and nodded. “I promise,” he whispered.

It took her a few seconds to collect herself then she cleared her throat nervously. “R-remember when I went to Madam Pomfrey’s for a refill on m-my potions?” she stammered, looking back to the ring that was still enticing her.

“Yes?” Harry prompted with a raised eyebrow. “You told me that she would Floo them to you...”

“Actually, I-I didn’t need them anymore,” she said quickly, tears starting to well in her eyes again.

“How could you not need them?” Harry asked incredulously. “I saw you taking them each week like normal.”

“Well, that was water, actually...” Tonks said nervously, Harry could feel the perspiration begin to bead on her palms. “I couldn’t take the birth control potions because it would hurt the baby...”

“Hurt the...” Harry’s arms dropped to his sides as he looked at Tonks, so stunned that his jaw went slack. “Baby?” he whispered quietly.

“I’m so sorry,” she cried, reaching for his shoulders and latching onto them. “I built up an immunity to the batch I was taking and I was three weeks along by time I had my first examination... Please say something...” she pleaded when he continued to stare at her, trying to process the information he’d just been given.

“W-we could have lost our jobs...” he whispered after a moment.

Tonks winced and bowed her head. “I know... I should have listened to you...”

“We’re going to have a baby...” Harry said again, a slight smile hitching on his lips.

“Yes, I’m pregnant, I screwed up, alright?!” Tonks said frustratingly, snapping her head up to look at Harry. “I said I was...” She was cut off by a pair of lips pressing against hers. Tonks was shocked, to say the least, and her eyes remained wide, even as Harry pulled back, revealing a broad smile. “Wha... You... You’re ok with this?” she asked in a state of shock.

“It’s earlier than I would have expected,” Harry said as he cupped her cheek, “and since you said yes, we should be fine with the division.”

“What?” she asked, her turn to be confused.

Harry took the ring from its box and slipped it on Tonks’ finger, smiling the entire time. “We’re engaged,” Harry explained in a low voice, “and according to regulations, we can’t be fired for your pregnancy or our actions over the past three years.” He kissed her tenderly, feeling her relax into him. “We’ll be married, and we’re going to have a family...”

Tears fell freely from Tonks' eyes again, looking from the ring to Harry's beaming face. "Why?" she asked simply, looking deeply into his twinkling eyes.

"I love you," Harry said with a smile, "and I realized that I want you as my wife. I'd made up my mind *long* before now..."

“You knew the ring that I liked?” she asked again, dumbstruck as she looked at the ring on her trembling hand.

“I guess it proves we were meant to be together,” Harry said with a shrug, his smile firmly in place. “I saw it in the window and knew it was made for you...”

“But... what about Hermione?” Tonks asked quietly. “She loves you...”

“I’m sure she’ll understand and come to accept us...” Harry said with a reassuring kiss to her forehead. “We were friends, first and foremost, and I don’t plan on losing her as a friend. I’m sure she won’t be happy initially, but she’ll be fine with it in time...”

“Harry, you don’t understand,” Tonks said emphatically. She retrieved the crumpled letter and handed it back to Harry. “Read it...”

Harry looked at her with mild irritation but unfolded the parchment and reread Hermione's latest correspondence.

*My Dearest Harry,
I'm sorry if sending you this letter gets you into trouble, I know
Hedwig stands out but she wouldn't let me use any of the school
owls...*

I hope your mission is going well, school just let out for us and I'll be spending Christmas with my parents for the first time in five years! I hoped that you could be there with me, and James and Marion have accepted an invitation for my family's Christmas feast... I've got to stop this rambling business. Remember when I asked you to be patient with me? I know it hurt you to hear those words and I still need time, but I really need to talk with you, Harry. I've missed you so much over the last five years but that's nothing compared to now. I really need to see you more than an hour a day, when we do see each other. I know that you're on assignment and undercover but

*I'm feeling so lonely and depressed... It's worse than when I was with
Ro... him
James and Marion have been wonderful friends and I couldn't ask for
any two people who are so supportive and understanding. But they're
not you, Harry. Nobody in this world is you...
Please, come and see me on Christmas if you can't come sooner. I
want to talk to you about everything. About you, me, us, him, Tonks,
what happened to our friendship but most of all, I just really need to
see you.
Please say you'll come... I couldn't bear it if you didn't...
With much love from
Hermione*

"You see," Tonks said with a sniff. "She's not going to be happy about this... about *us*, Harry. Hermione may only be your friend, but she's finally starting to wake up... she'll be devastated."

Harry stood and began pacing around the bedroom. "I know she's not going to be happy at first," he said with a sigh, "but with time, things will smooth out." Harry turned to Tonks and guided her into his arms. "But she's going to have to realize that I love you, we're getting married, and we're having a baby..." he said hoarsely. "I'm going to be a father!"

Tonks smiled at him compassionately and nodded. "You're going to be a dad," she said soothingly.

"And you're going to be a mum!" Harry said with a laugh.

"Is there something funny about that?!" she asked with a playful scowl but joined in the laughter before Harry kissed her passionately.

"From where I'm standing, everything's as it should be," he whispered seriously. "We only have tonight before we head back... why don't we celebrate and enjoy ourselves while we can? We can deal with everything else when we get back..."

"But how are we going to tell Hermione about us?" Tonks asked worriedly.

Harry morphed into his persona as James and watched as Tonks followed suit as Marion. "Why don't we worry about it when we cross that bridge?" he asked tenderly. "I know we can't put it off... I have an idea: I'll tell her when I go see her on Christmas... how about that?"

Tonks smiled slightly and nodded her agreement. "It's only four days away," she said as Harry hugged her. "Now, about that dinner and celebration..."

Harry smirked and offered Tonks his arm. She accepted it gladly and the newly engaged couple set out for the final night of their holiday.

"Love, the Portkey activates in five minutes!" Harry called from the common room of their hut. "What's taking so long?"

"Almost done!" Tonks replied from the bedroom. With less than a minute to spare, she stumbled through the door with everything she'd be bringing back floating behind her. "Sorry... It's getting harder to bend over..." Tonks said and smiled apologetically.

"But you're barely showing," Harry said with slight laugh.

"You try and bend over when your stomach feels like you've just eaten a turkey... *by yourself!*" Tonks said irritably.

Harry gathered their luggage and Hedwig with a slight sigh. "I'm sorry if I've made you angry..."

"I'm not angry," Tonks said again. "We're going home and there's a lot we have to deal with when we get there!"

"I know, but everything will be fine," Harry said comfortingly as they both took hold of the large conch shell they'd salvaged from the ocean the night before. Almost immediately, Harry felt the all-too-familiar hook behind his navel and the three of them shot forward in portkey fashion. They landed with a thump in their sitting room and Harry was just able to catch Tonks before she tripped over her luggage.

"Thanks, Love," she said with a grateful smile. Hedwig silently flitted upstairs just before their house sitter emerged from the kitchen.

“How was your trip?!” Hermione squealed as she wrapped her arms first around Tonks then Harry in greeting. “You both look like you’ve gotten loads of sun!”

“It was the most relaxing week of my life!” Tonks said with a sad smile as she looked at the beaming Hermione.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked worriedly, looking between Harry and Tonks. “Did something happen?”

“I’m just upset that I had to leave the beach,” Tonks lied. “I really hate the snow and cold...”

“That she does,” Harry said with a comforting squeeze of her shoulder. “I was hoping a week away from the snow would help...”

“It did, Love,” Tonks said with a smile. “I should get my bags upstairs...”

“I’ve got them,” Harry said quickly, bending to pick up their bags before Tonks could even move. “Why don’t you two sit down, I’ll be back in a second...” Harry took the bags upstairs rather swiftly and fetched an owl treat for Hedwig. “Sorry, Hedwig,” Harry said quietly. “I didn’t have any treats with me on our trip, can you forgive me?”

His response came as a gentle nipping at his finger and Harry smiled brightly at the snowy owl. He stroked her head softly before returning to the sitting room. There was a large blaze already dancing in the fireplace and Tonks was talking to Hermione in the sofa that faced it.

“*The Caribbean?!*” Hermione asked scandalously, looking at Harry with an approving smile. Harry caught a glimpse of something in her eyes as she forcibly widened her smile followed by a forced laugh.

“It was so beautiful,” Tonks crooned with a dreamy look in her eyes. “I can still smell the ocean and feel the warm sand on my feet...”

“That sand was *hot!*” Harry said with a laugh as he sat in a chair off to the side. “I think I preferred the hammock right outside the door...”

“Or swimming in the crystal blue waters...” Tonks sighed happily.

Harry had been watching Hermione throughout the conversation and noted her demeanor was slowly slipping from happiness to depression. He glanced at Tonks, catching her eye, and his fiancée caught on immediately. She looked properly at Hermione and noticed how white and thin she'd become. Hermione was doing a good job at covering it up, but the darker outlines under her eyes spoke volumes.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" Tonks asked quietly. She gently laid a hand on her friend's knee and Harry noted tears forming in her eyes.

"Oh, just more stuff about Harry," Hermione said quietly. "I just miss him... more than I thought I would." She looked to her two friends and smiled softly. "It's nothing to worry about, I asked him to owl me about visiting this Christmas, but I haven't heard anything from him yet... I usually get a reply straight away, but he must be deep undercover or something's happened—"

"I'm sure nothing's happened," Tonks interrupted before Hermione could follow that train of thought further. "He's probably just busy; he is an Auror after all..."

"You're right," Hermione said with a sigh. "I know you're right... I just never thought I'd miss him *this* much..." she looked pleadingly to Tonks' eyes. "Do you think I could be in love with him?" she asked in a whisper.

Tonks was taken aback by the bluntness of the question and Harry could literally see her fight to remain calm. "You might be," Harry offered, taking Hermione's attention from Tonks. "Have you thought about the possibility?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "It's been on my mind since the night after Ron came for me," she said softly. "W-we almost kissed, I spoke with Marion... but I asked him to wait."

"Well," Tonks said experimentally. "W-what would you do if he happened to be with someone else?"

"What?" Hermione asked in surprise. "I-I really hadn't thought about that..." She looked worried for a moment. "Harry's very close with his partner..."

"If he and his partner were together," Harry prompted, "how would you react?" he asked, fighting down the nervousness that was seeping into him. He glanced at Tonks and saw she was doing her best to keep her tears at bay.

Hermione sat silent for a few minutes, pulling absently at her lower lip as she mulled the question over in her mind. She sighed and looked back at Harry. "If Harry was happy, I'd be happy for him," she said quietly.

"But it would kill you," Tonks said just as quietly.

Hermione nodded. "We were never more than best friends," she admitted, her voice not rising above the volume of a whisper, "but he said he loved me..." A tear finally broke from the restraint of Hermione's eyelid and splashed helplessly on her cheek. "I asked him to wait, but I might have had him waiting too long..."

Harry sighed solemnly and before he knew what he was doing took her hand. "I'm sorry..."

Tonks and Hermione both looked up to him at the same time. Hermione smiled at him softly and Tonks' eyes were wide with warning.

"It's not your fault, James," Hermione said with a slightly nervous laugh then squeezed his hand gently and released it. "But thank you for your sympathy." Tonks' warning look rapidly changed to a covert glare and Harry sat back with a red face. "If I want Harry in my life," Hermione continued with a resigned look and a hint of defeat laced in her voice, "then I'm going to accept him for who he is, whether or not he's with someone other than me..." An egg timer went off in the kitchen just as Hermione finished speaking and she shot from her chair in panic. "I almost forgot the food!"

She raced into the kitchen, Harry and Tonks following behind her curiously. "Food?" Harry asked as they stepped into the kitchen.

"A surprise for you two when you got home," Hermione said hurriedly as she lifted pot lids and flipped a few tuna steaks. "I thought it would be nice for you to come home to tea ready and waiting..."

"We don't deserve all this," Tonks said haltingly. Harry put an arm around her, bracing for the stream of tears that were ready to spill from her eyes.

"You two are the best friends I have right now," Hermione said with a caring smile. "You've saved my sanity on countless occasions and my life on one... The least I can do is cook for you every once in a while and that's not even repaying an ounce of what you've given me."

Tonks nodded as the tears began flowing then quickly went up the stairs to their bedroom. Hermione looked at James in confusion and he shrugged. "She's been very emotional for the past week or two," he said with an apologetic smile. "Keep at it; we'll be back down good as new..."

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "I hope it wasn't anything I said," she whispered, afraid that her confession had some strange adverse affect on her newfound friend.

"I don't think it was," Harry lied as he turned to the steps. "We'll be back in a few minutes..."

Harry entered their bedroom to see Tonks lying on their bed weeping silently. Without a word, he sat next to her and drew her into a tender hug.

"I feel so foolish!" she hissed as he wiped her tears away gently. "I told you," she whispered.

"You did," Harry said quietly and kissed her forehead. "But you heard her, if she found out, she'd support us..."

"But the hurt in her eyes... And you almost gave everything away!" Tonks hissed.

"I didn't know what I was doing, but it turned out fine in the end," Harry replied with a slight smile.

She frowned in response to his chiding. "This isn't funny! We can't let *anyone* know!"

"I know that," Harry said quietly. "What I'm saying is she thinks of us as such good friends that my apology was something she might have expected... listen, I'll write her in the morning and on Christmas let her know that we're engaged. Why don't we try to enjoy that secret of ours while we can?"

Tonks sighed once again and wiped her eyes. "Look, I know you're not going to run off on me and I'm sorry I'm so jealous... I remember the problems you had when you told me about Madam Puddifoot's and... Cho was it?" she asked and Harry nodded. "Hermione's my friend as well and this is going to be really hard to deal with..."

"I know," Harry whispered with a kiss to her temple.

"Can you forgive me for being jealous of her?" Tonks asked quietly. "I just can't help it... but I don't want you to lose her as a friend..."

"There's nothing to forgive," he said with a slight smile. "You've known how I've felt about her for ages and I can't expect that knowledge to just fly out of your head. Just try to control it?"

"I-I will," she stuttered, hugging him tightly. "It's hard, but I will... for you."

Harry kissed her gently on the lips before pulling back and smiling at the woman in his arms. "Then why don't we have something to eat and we'll work on this together?"

Tonks smiled genuinely for the first time since they'd gotten back and nodded quietly. They made their way back to the kitchen where a nervous Hermione was pacing back and forth, having already plated the food. She looked up tenuously as Harry and Tonks entered and smiled hopefully at her two friends.

"Is everything ok?" she asked quietly. "I didn't say anything to upset you, did I?"

Tonks shook her head and wrapped Hermione in a hug. "Everything's fine. I just seem to cry at the drop of a hat these days." Hermione rubbed her friend's back soothingly and released a sigh of relief. "Why don't we eat this wonderful meal you've cooked for us?"

Hermione smiled brightly as they took their seats. She spent most of the meal talking animatedly about some wizarding dishes she'd discovered in a rarely used cookbook in Harry's library. Hermione went on about how she'd modified a few recipes with a bit of French and Japanese ingredients and to her delight, Harry and Tonks approved tremendously of her work.

Night settled quickly on the small wizarding village and after glasses of wine by the fire—Tonks had insisted on pumpkin juice—Hermione took her leave. Long after she had left, Harry and Tonks lie awake in their bed whispering about the turn their lives had made. To her amusement, Harry was eager to start buying toys for his daughter.

"I think *he* will want a broom and a Quidditch training kit," Tonks said with a giggle.

"*She* can play Quidditch all *she* likes," Harry said with a laugh, "but I'm going to dote on my *baby girl!*"

"Are you ready for a daughter?" Tonks asked with a chuckle. "You know, she'll eventually start dating—"

"She's not dating until she's thirty!" Harry said adamantly. "And any bloke who lays a hand on her is going to answer—"

"Settle down, Love," Tonks giggled after a kiss to his cheek. "You don't have to worry about that anyway because we're going to have a *boy!*"

"Girl."

"Goodnight, Love," Tonks said with a roll of her eyes and a slight smile. "Hermione's coming back over in the morning to help finish up the last room..."

"You still want to go with the pastels?" he asked with a snicker, wrapping an arm around her protectively as he snuggled into her back.

"They're warm and cozy like a sunny meadow," Tonks said with a sleepy yawn. Harry nodded his agreement and no further words were spoken as they both fell fast asleep.

Harry found himself awake bright and early the next day. Tonks was still far beyond the reaches of consciousness so he let her sleep as long as she could. Harry had two things that were firmly implanted in his mind: first, he had to write to Hermione and second, he was going to spend as much time as he could in a wizarding toy store down the road from their house. After getting ready for his outing, Harry quickly scrawled a note to Hermione.

*Hermione,
I'm sorry I haven't been in contact often enough but I will come visit
on Christmas. We do need to talk, about everything, and I hope we
can clear things up then.
Say 'hello' to your parents and the Bakers for me!
Harry*

Hedwig seemed anxious to deliver whatever Harry had in his hands and with a hoot, flew out the window as quickly as she could. The white owl disappeared almost immediately into the heavy snowfall and Harry made sure to bundle up before leaving the house.

He returned a few hours later carrying a single, small bag. Most observers would think that he'd spent quite a bit of time shopping for the perfect gift, but in the wizarding world the bag told a different story.

This particular bag had the same amount of space as that of a small room, approximately the size of the soon-to-be nursery they were preparing to paint later that day. Inside that virtually room-sized bag lay packages of nappies, furniture, stuffed toys, teething rings, and several other baby accouterments.

Harry huffed as he stepped back in the house and hung his heavy, wool cloak on a nearby peg. He stopped and smiled with wind-burnt cheeks at the woman who made him the happiest man on the planet.

"Where did you go?" Tonks asked with a slightly curious smile.

"I just went to the store," he replied with a devilish grin. "But you can't look... It's a surprise!"

"You know I hate surprises!" Tonks said impatiently but her beaming smile told a different story. "What did you get?!" she asked with an eager laugh.

"You'll just have to wait," he retorted and shrunk the bag down to fit in his pocket. She started for him but his quick reflexes and raised eyebrow stopped her. Before she knew what had happened, Harry had her arms pinned to her sides in a gentle, yet strong, hug.

"Let me go!" she said in an attempt to sound menacing but she squealed at his sudden kiss to her neck. "*JAMES!*" she squealed again when he picked her up and started for the stairs. Just as his foot landed on the first rise, however, a knock came at the door. "Go get the door, you prat!" she scolded playfully and he obeyed the command.

"Good morning, James!" Hermione said with a bright smile. She looked far happier than he'd remembered seeing her since he'd realized how deep his feelings for Tonks were.

"Good morning," Harry returned with a laugh as she happily hugged him then moved to Tonks. "You're certainly looking better today!"

"Harry finally owled me this morning," Hermione said with a wide smile. "He's coming to see me!" she said with a near laugh to her voice.

"That's great!" Harry said with a bright grin. He glanced at Tonks who hugged Hermione close with a bright, fake, smile plastered on her face.

"I hope things work out for you!" Tonks said as she pulled back. "How about we have some breakfast before we paint the last room?"

"I'm famished, Love," Harry said, grabbing his stomach as if he hadn't eaten in days, eliciting a snort of laughter from Hermione that infected Tonks.

Breakfast had ended hours ago. The time since then had been spent in the final bedroom of the modest house. Setting down the rollers and paint brushes, the three friends stepped back and admired their handiwork.

"These pastels make me feel warm and safe," Hermione sighed contentedly as she took in the room. "The yellows and baby blues are just wonderful." Hermione looked over at Harry and Tonks and smiled wanly. They were leaning against one another with curious smiles on their faces and Hermione gasped.

"What's wrong?" Tonks asked, startled.

"Marion?" Hermione asked, the glee nearly bursting from her. "Are you pregnant?"

“What?” Tonks asked, bewildered. “H-How could you tell?”

Hermione broke into tears of joy and hugged Tonks to her tightly. “It was in your faces! My parents had that same look when I’d done something that made them proud...”

She quickly changed to Harry and hugged him tightly as well. “Congratulations, James!” she mumbled through her tears. “You’re going to have the family that you’ve dreamt of!”

Harry hugged the crying Hermione and patted her on the back gently. “Thank you, Hermione,” he whispered softly and looked to Tonks who seemed ready to burst into tears herself.

“Is it ok?” Tonks asked quietly when Hermione pulled herself away from Harry.

“Are you mad?!” Hermione asked incredulously and hugged her friend once again. “I couldn’t be happier for the two of you! Of course it’s ok!”

The tears that Tonks had been fighting off spilled forth and she hugged Hermione tighter. “Thank you,” Tonks sobbed into her shoulder.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Hermione said softly and laughed slightly. “This is brilliant news!” she crowed to Tonks’ sputtered laughter.

“It’s these blasted hormones!” Tonks sobbed.

“When did you find out?” Hermione asked with a comforting hand on Tonks’ back.

“I knew before we left on our trip and told James before we came back,” she said truthfully, trying to calm down.

“Boy was I surprised,” Harry said with a nervous laugh. “Before I knew, I made the mistake of asking her what she’d been eating...”

Hermione cringed but began laughing. “That must have gone over like a ton of bricks!”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Tonks deadpanned with a faux glare at Harry.

“Well, now is as good a time as any,” Harry said in a very happy, Mr. Weasley fashion that caused Hermione to look at him strangely. Harry pulled a bag from his pocket and enlarged it to twice its normal size. “Marion, if you would be so kind as to reach into the bag and pull out *one* item.”

Tonks looked at him with a mix of suspicion and glee, causing Harry to laugh once again. She reached into the bag and her eyes went wide at the number of small packages her fingers came across. She controlled herself, however, and pulled out a hand-sized, wrapped box. Harry grinned at Hermione and winked at Tonks before relieving her of the box and setting it on the floor. In the span of a heartbeat, the wrapped box grew several times its size. Tonks gasped and looked at the package with wide eyes.

“Open it,” Harry said with a bright smile, bouncing energetically on the balls of his feet. Tonks reached for the magical bow and with one, swift tug, the paper fell from a large box with a wizarding photo on each side. Tears sprang to her eyes once again when a mother walked into the scene depicted in the photo. She was carrying a small bundle and the room was obviously a nursery. A man entered the scene just afterwards and the two kissed their baby on her small head before laying her in the crib. The scene dissolved into large, friendly letters and a representation of the bedding that was in the box.

“It’s perfect,” she breathed as Harry opened the package to reveal the crib. As the cardboard fell away, Tonks wrapped Harry in a tight hug and wept happily into his chest.

“It knows the age of the baby,” Harry said with a smile. “When she gets older, the bed self-transfigures into the appropriate bedding...”

"That's wonderful," Hermione said as well, tears streaking her cheeks as she looked over the crib. "And the company took Muggle regulations into consideration!"

"Shall we unload everything else?" Harry asked with a laugh. "I didn't buy everything... there was too much to choose from!"

"You got more?!" Tonks and Hermione asked in unison.

"Mostly furniture and nappies," Harry admitted with a grin, "and a few toys..."

"You should have waited!" Hermione said in a huff. "How am I going to throw a baby shower for her if there's nothing left to buy?!"

"A baby shower?" Tonks asked in surprise. Tears welled in her eyes again when Hermione nodded.

"Of course! I can't let one of my closest friends go without a baby shower!" Hermione said incredulously. "Especially for her first!"

Tonks didn't know what to say or do so she hugged Hermione as tightly as she could. Hermione gasped at her strength but laughed heartily at her friend's reaction.

"Why don't we see what your husband bought since he's gone ahead and done it anyway," she said soothingly, sending a wink towards Harry.

Tonks wasted no more time and gift after gift was produced from the bag and enlarged. Soon, the nursery was complete, save for the baby to go in it. There was also a solid lack of clothes and such which brought sparkles to the women's eyes.

"I'm sure my friends would be happy to join in!" Hermione said excitedly as Harry watched the two of them. He was dreading the day that he and Tonks would come off of assignment and reveal themselves to Hermione. He only hoped that their talk on Christmas would help ease the blow. His eyes focused on Tonks and slid down her body to rest on her belly. Though she hadn't started showing yet, there was a firmness present she hadn't displayed before.

Harry looked up to see Tonks watching him, a smile playing at her lips and an infinite depth to her hazel eyes that clearly told him she was in love with him. Hermione noticed the look and smiled as well.

"I think it's time I head home and work out this baby shower," she said after clearing her throat. "I think we can get it together after Christmas, is that ok with you?"

Tonks' eyes misted again and she smiled. "Thank you, Hermione," she said, holding back the grateful tears. The two women hugged and the three of them went to the front door.

Tonks fell into Harry's arms after Hermione had left and he held her to him patiently. He rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head several times before she finally calmed to sniffles. "She's not going to be happy when we reveal ourselves after this assignment," she said sadly.

"I know," Harry said quietly. "She'll be angry at first, but everything will work out."

"How do you know?" Tonks asked quietly. "How can you know that everything will be ok?"

Harry gently cupped her chin and brought her tear laden gaze to his. With a soft smile, he wiped her cheeks clear and kissed her ever so tenderly on the lips. "Because," he said with a widening smile, "I have the most wonderful woman in the world in my life and she's carrying our first child. I've never felt so complete and I can only expect that our lives will become better as we have more children and grow older... Then we get to see our grandchildren..."

Tonks wrapped her arms around him, kissing him hard and long. "I love you," she whispered after they pulled apart.

"I love you too," Harry said with a bright smile that made Tonks weak in the knees. "Why don't we have some tea and get ready for tomorrow's outing? Hermione's coming over so we can all go to Diagon Alley before tea at her parents'."

Tonks smiled and the two went into the kitchen. A few hours later, Harry stepped from the bathroom to see Tonks gazing into the nursery with a wide, goofy grin on her face. He smiled at the sight and shifted her long, auburn hair to the side so he could kiss her bare neck.

"Hey," she said softly, reaching up and running the fingers of her right hand through his hair.

"Hey," Harry said as he wrapped his arms protectively around her and rubbed her taught belly. "It won't be long now..." Harry smiled against the bare skin of her neck.

"What?" she asked quietly, glancing out the corner of her eye to his smiling face.

"What if *she's* born on my birthday?" Harry asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I'm not sure, but the end of July is when Madam Pomfrey said *he'd* be born," Tonks said with a wry grin, feeling his silent laughter rumble through her body.

"I can see you rocking *her* to sleep in the corner," Harry whispered more seriously. Both of them looked to the rocking chair instinctively. There was a stuffed, pink elephant currently occupying the cushion and on impulse, Tonks left Harry's embrace to take her position. She smiled and held the stuffed animal as if it were a baby. Harry laughed at the sight and crossed the room to join her. "See, even the fates are pointing to a girl," he said with a kiss to Tonks' temple as she laughed at the absurdity of his statement.

"Let's get to sleep, Love," Tonks said as she cupped his cheek and brought him in for a tender kiss. "We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow, then... Christmas..." she trailed off with a nervous look.

"It'll be rough at first," Harry said softly, helping her from the chair though he didn't need to do so. "But Hermione will work around her anger, I'm sure of it."

"I hope so," Tonks said quietly as they took one last look at their future child's room. She subconsciously rubbed her stomach and, still smiling, switched off the light.

"How long has she been in there?" Hermione asked quietly as she and Harry sat at the kitchen table nursing their mugs of tea.

Harry sighed. "For the last half hour," he said wearily. "I made the mistake of making sausage for breakfast this morning and it set her off."

Hermione smiled at him sympathetically. "That was very sweet of you last night," she said quietly. "Surprising her with all the nursery furniture..."

"I got excited," Harry admitted with a nervous smile. Tonks called for his help and he quickly excused himself. "Be right back..."

Harry hurried to the bathroom and smiled comfortingly at the woman who was still kneeling on the bathroom floor.

"Just go without me," Tonks said with a queasy voice. She opened her mouth to say something more but her face went green in a flash and she vomited once again.

Harry knelt beside her and rubbed her back comfortingly. "There's no off limits food at Hermione's parents' house," Harry said reassuringly. "Besides, getting out in the fresh air will help..."

"You know I hate snow," Tonks said after she suppressed a gag. Harry handed her a glass of water which she sipped at gratefully. "But I do feel better now."

"Why don't you brush your teeth then and we'll head out?" Harry asked with a smile. "We can look at baby robes..." he prompted.

Tonks' eyes lit up immediately and with a quick, reassuring smile, allowed Harry to help her to her feet. She cleaned herself up and the two of them caught up with Hermione in the kitchen.

As quick as a blink, they were gone, apparating to the Leaky Cauldron and heading out the back. Harry had never been in Diagon Alley during the winter seasons and his breath caught in his throat at the sight.

Snow had been packed down and magically modified to not be slippery, garland stretched across doors, windows, and between the buildings. But the centerpiece of all the decoration was a giant Christmas tree that was flashing merrily in front of Gringotts. Harry stared in awe at the holiday decorations all around the main street and barely realized that Hermione and Tonks were laughing at him.

"I've never been here during Christmas," Harry said quietly as he turned to them.

"I'm sorry, James," Tonks said sweetly. "I forgot about that..."

"I wonder if Harry has been down here this time of year," Hermione wondered aloud as she smiled at her friends. "He's lived a very sheltered life long before we finished school," she explained as her gaze shifted to Flourish and Blotts.

Harry and Tonks knew immediately what caught her attention and as her friends, James and Marion, they smiled knowingly. One did not spend time around Hermione without realizing her love of books.

"Shall we stop in Flourish and Blotts first, then?" Harry asked with a slight grin.

"You don't mind?" Hermione asked hopefully, returning her full attention to her two friends.

Tonks laughed. "Not at all," she said with a smile, "but if I know James, he'll want to go to Quality Quidditch Supplies to gawk at the latest broom..."

Harry blushed slightly but smiled sheepishly. "Do you mind if we part ways for a half hour or so?"

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "What is it with blokes and Quidditch?"

"I happen to be a Puddlemere fan myself," Tonks said with a disgruntled sniff.

"Oh, I didn't mean to offend you, Marion!" Hermione covered quickly and frowned at her friend's sly grin. "Honestly!" she said in a huff but laughed all the same.

"I'll meet you two lovely ladies in a bit then," Harry said with a chuckle before giving Tonks a quick kiss. He waved to them as the two women wound their way through the masses of last-minute holiday shoppers. He grinned to himself and set out for his favorite store, with any luck a new broom *would* be on display.

Harry wasn't disappointed when he arrived to find the latest model of the ThunderBuster, the Mark III, displayed prominently in the window. He smiled when he remembered Tonks' description of how he'd gawk at the new broom. *She wouldn't be disappointed...* Harry thought as he did, indeed, gawk at the wonderfully built, pro Quidditch sanctioned broom that could fly circles around his old Firebolt.

He went into the store and looked around, hiding, despite himself, when the store owner looked in his direction. His stomach fell when the tall, slender Asian woman walked over and offered him a smile.

"Welcome to Quality Quidditch Supplies!" Cho Chang said happily as she closed in on him. Harry blushed involuntarily though smiled slightly in return. "Is there anything I can help you with?" she asked inquisitively. "I saw you admiring the new ThunderBuster, are you interested in purchasing one?"

Harry cleared his throat and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, but I just came in to browse—" He stopped when he noticed that she wasn't looking at him but was instead staring fixedly out the plate glass window overlooking Diagon Alley. Harry caught a streak of red light out of the corner of his eye and he turned around to see someone on the street slump to the ground.

"*CALL THE AURORS!*" he shouted earnestly and pulled out his wand. Much to Cho's credit, she shot to her back room where the store's fireplace was. Harry braced himself for the fight and ran for the door.

The place was in chaos. Everywhere he looked, people were slumped in the street, children were running frantically in an attempt to find their parents and the gigantic tree was on fire. Three black robed wizards suddenly appeared around him and instinctively Harry ducked. A green light and whoosh of wind shot over his head only to strike the Death Eater opposite the caster. Harry's wand shot out and red streaks of light claimed the consciousness of his remaining two assailants.

With a bang, ropes shot out of his wand to cocoon the unconscious men and he surveyed the situation. Children's screams came from the direction of Knockturn Alley and without a second thought, Harry raced in that direction. He growled angrily when he arrived to find two hags pulling screaming children towards an open door and, with an anger born of a new father, Harry stunned and bound the evil creatures with ropes. The two children immediately clung to him and told him where their parents were.

Harry looked around the dark alley once more and satisfied, pulled the children to the safety of the Quidditch store. He shot back outside to hear Hermione's voice shouting above the din, directing people into the nearby stores as she deflected spell after spell from the surrounding shadows. He ran towards her and in rapid succession took down two Death Eaters that were sneaking around her flanks.

"*JAMES!*" Hermione shouted in warning as her wand flicked towards him followed by a "*STUPEFY!*" Harry ducked in time to hear the thump of someone falling behind him. Hermione quickly dispatched the other three wizards and lifted a crying toddler in her free arm. "Marion is further up the Alley!" Hermione said quickly as she headed in the opposite direction.

"Thanks," Harry said and ran full out towards the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron. Tonks was working just as efficiently as Hermione had been but her face was becoming increasingly tinged with green. Harry made it to her side and with their combined efforts put the four wizards that were surrounding them out of commission.

Tonks, however, immediately fell to her knees and vomited in the middle of the alley. "Why now of all times?!" she gagged as another

wave of nausea claimed her. Harry kept an eye open around them when the hair on the back of his neck stood bolt upright. Instinctively, he pushed Tonks out of the way and he dove in the opposite direction.

Mere seconds later, the snow-covered cobble street exploded in a flash of green light and stone shrapnel. Harry rolled to a crouch a few meters away and launched a stunner at their attacker only to have it rebound back at him. He dodged again and concentrated. Sure enough, a powerful shield was protecting this one but Harry knew how to correct that disadvantage.

He aimed his wand again but purposely struck the shield at an odd angle. His blood froze when he heard the familiar laugh of Draco Malfoy echo from beneath the mask he wore and Harry smiled brightly at the sudden turn of events.

“Why are you smiling?” Draco asked in a growl.

Harry simply looked above the arrogant wizard and pointed.

Draco glanced up quickly but the falling gargoyle that Harry’s deflected curse had dislodged knocked him unconscious.

Harry bound his school rival and levitated him from the street. Tonks had recovered from her bout of morning sickness and joined him. “Looks like we’ve got the git!” she growled with a punch to the unconscious wizard’s body. “I wish we could have told Ginny that we were tracking him down!”

“I know,” Harry said sadly. “Let’s get back... there might be more of them...” With a nod, Tonks trotted slightly ahead with her wand at the ready. Harry had to walk slower with Malfoy dragging along the ground behind him. The sound of multiple apparitions filled the air and Harry glanced around to see Aurors flood the street. He caught sight of Hermione with the toddler, handing the crying child to a woman who was sitting on the ground with a splint on her leg.

Time from that moment onward suddenly slowed, making it feel as if everyone was moving through molasses.

"HERMIONE!" Tonks shouted at the top of her lungs just after a flash of blue light glared off the roof of Flourish and Blotts. Tonks bolted towards Hermione who was still unaware of the curse that had been unleashed her way. Dropping Malfoy to the ground with a satisfying thud, Harry started forward as well. His eyes caught sight of the wizard who'd unleashed the curse and without using his wand Harry launched a stunning curse. Caught by surprise, the dark wizard crumpled and fell from the roof into a pile of snow in the street.

Tonks, however, didn't see the debris in her way. She tripped on a large stone just before reaching Hermione and she fell into her. The blue curse struck her squarely in the back and she slumped unconscious over Hermione's prone body.

"NOOO!" Harry shouted at the top of his lungs as he half-stumbled, half-ran to his fallen partner. He slid to a halt next to the two of them and immediately cast an enervation charm on her. The spell had no effect on her, nor did a second casting of the charm. Tonks still lay unconscious as Aurors filtered in, collecting the bound Death Eaters. *"AUROR DOWN!"* Harry yelled in a panic when his repeated attempts to wake her failed. Fear paralyzed him even as he sat, cradling Tonks in his arms.

"Get her to St. Mungo's!" Moody barked from down the street.

"A-Auror?" Hermione stammered as she watched the scene unfold before her eyes.

Harry didn't waste any time and immediately apparated his unconscious fiancée to the wizarding hospital. *"Unknown curse!"* he shouted as a team of mediwitches and mediwizards ran up to him.

"What's her name?" one of the mediwizards asked hurriedly.

"Nym... Marion Baker!" he corrected. *"Auror, security ward, code eye-ex-eye-eye!"* Harry rattled off. Harry followed the team as they ran to an operating room and was stopped at the doors.

"Sorry, you can't come in..." a mediwitch said sympathetically. *"You'll have to wait in the sitting area!"* She turned and followed the rest of

her team into the room, leaving a shell-shocked Harry Potter staring at the doors in front of him.

A deep depression began to settle in his heart as he walked dumbly to the sitting area. He'd just gotten engaged, found out that he'd be a father, and in the span of a few days, he may have lost the future he craved so much. *Why does it have to happen to me!?* he screamed silently as he slumped into a chair, blind to everything happening around him.

"James?" a female voice came from somewhere around him.

He glanced about in a futile attempt to find the speaker but returned to staring directly at the operating room door.

"James..." Hermione said again as she sat next to him. "How is she?"

"What? I haven't heard..." he said distantly. "I just got here..."

"You've been here for four hours..." Hermione corrected quietly, turning him to look at her.

"Four hours..." Harry said dumbly, looking at his friend but not seeing her. The words sunk in and he shook his head. "*FOUR HOURS?!*" he asked incredulously.

Hermione nodded sadly. "Three Aurors and fourteen civilians died," she whispered. "There were fifty-six injuries... including M-Marion," Hermione said with a sob. "I'm sorry, James... I should have been paying attention!"

"Don't blame yourself, Hermione," Harry said evenly. "I could blame myself, but it is neither our faults! That ruddy coward of a Death Eater is the one that did it all! But... but my wife..." Harry said, feeling tears start to sting his eyes. "He hit my wife... with an *unknown* curse!"

"I'll see what I can find out," Hermione said compassionately, leaving him in the waiting area. She returned a few minutes later with a frown on her face and sat next to him again. "She's in her room, but they won't tell me anything, you're going to have to talk to them."

Harry nodded dumbly and followed Hermione to the information desk. After explaining he was Tonks' husband, they let him and Hermione visit her.

They stepped from the lift and walked down an infinitely long hallway. The walk seemed to take forever, yet, almost instantly, he was standing in the doorway looking at a pale-faced Marion Baker lying deathly still in her bed. He rushed to her side immediately and took her hand in his as he sat down.

"Can you hear me, Love?" he asked with a trembling voice, feeling her cold skin in his hands.

Tonks' eyes fluttered open slowly, fighting the brightness of the room. She looked blearily at Harry and a wide, but weak, smile crossed her face. "H-hi," she said weakly, barely able to squeeze his hand.

"Shh, don't talk," he said as tears began to roll down his cheeks.

"Is she ok?" Tonks asked quietly with a ragged breath escaping her lips.

"I'm fine, Marion," Hermione said reassuringly, taking the woman's other hand. "I'm right here..."

Tonks smiled at Hermione as tears began to streak from the corner of her eyes. "Take care of him, Hermione..." she whispered hoarsely, a sob catching in her throat.

"What?" Harry asked taken aback. "You're going to be fine, Love!"

"I'm sorry..." Tonks whispered. "I tripped... I should have—"

"Shh, it's ok," Harry said painfully as he caressed her cheek. "You're going to be fine and it wasn't your fault... *it wasn't your fault...*"

"Mr. Baker, may I have a word with you?" a mediwizard asked solemnly from the door.

Harry stood on gelatin filled legs and barely stumbled to the door. He couldn't grasp what was being said to him as his hope began to drain away.

"She's not going to make it through the night," the man said sadly. "She was struck with an advanced curse that wasn't keyed to her. Whatever was used reacts with an unintended target as if it were a slow-acting killing curse."

"S-she's dying?" Harry asked in a distant voice that didn't seem to be his own. His heart crumbled as the mediwizard placed his hand on Harry's shoulder in an attempt to comfort him.

"I'm afraid so," he replied softly.

"What about the baby... our baby?" Harry whispered as all the feeling in his body began to leave him. He looked pleadingly to the man in front of him.

"If we can find a surrogate mother that matches your wife's blood-type, then we might be able to save it," he said softly. "But your wife has a very rare blood-type of O negative..."

The world faded to a haze and he nodded his understanding. The only things clearly in view now were Hermione and Tonks. The room they were in swam out of focus as unshed tears made ready to escape the prison of his eyes. He closed the door quietly and walked slowly to Tonks' bed.

Hermione turned in her seat and saw the look of despair on her friend's face and the tears came unbidden from her eyes as Harry made his way to Tonks' side once again.

"I know that look," Tonks said with a sad smile. "I wasn't lucky this time, was I?" she asked with a hollow chuckle that caused her to roll into a coughing fit.

Harry smiled lovingly as he helped her settle back into her pillows. "I'm sorry... I wasn't fast enough this time either..." His tears finally broke free even though he tried to be strong. "Just when I thought I'd finally found a family..."

Tonks' eyes went wide. "What about the baby?" she gasped desperately. "Can she be saved?" she pleaded, clutching Harry's arms tightly.

"Not without someone who has O negative blood..." he whispered sadly and pulled her into a hug.

"Oh, no, the baby!" Hermione whimpered as everything sank in. "How can O negative blood help?" she asked with a determined flame sparking in her eyes.

"A surrogate m-mother..." Harry said looking up to Hermione.

She looked nervously from Harry to Tonks, weighing something in her mind. "I'll do it!" she declared forcefully, the fire in her eyes igniting into a bonfire that Harry had only seen when she was truly serious about something.

"W-what?" Tonks asked in a whisper as Harry laid her back once again.

"I have that blood type," Hermione explained, "I'll carry your baby for you."

"Hermione—" Harry said quickly.

"No, my mind is made up," Hermione interrupted.

Harry shook his head as he looked into Tonks' hazel eyes. "There's something you need to know first."

She looked at Harry in confusion. "What is there to know? My friend is dying and the only way to save her baby is for me to carry it..."

Harry took Tonks' hand and nodded. "Go ahead," he whispered and with a sigh of relief, Tonks reverted to her normal self.

"Tonks?!" Hermione whispered in disbelief. She looked hurriedly to Harry just as he shifted back to normal as well. "H-Harry?" Her hand shot to her mouth as she stumbled back into her chair in shock.

Harry's head drooped as he nodded. "This was our undercover assignment," he explained quietly. "We were posing as husband and wife..."

"Don't be angry, Hermione..." Tonks wheezed as her eyes fluttered closed then back open lazily.

"You've been with me the entire time?" Hermione whispered, still in shock.

"Inadvertently, yes," Harry admitted softly. "I couldn't reveal who I was, only Albus, Moody, Remus, and Kingsley knew..."

"But a baby?" Hermione stuttered, tears flowing down her cheeks as the realization that Tonks was dying right in front of them registered in her mind.

"Accident," Tonks breathed, trying to catch her breath, "p-potion..."

"She built an immunity to the birth control potion..." Harry said with a sob, cradling her head in his hands and kissing her gently.

Hermione didn't become angry, the scene before her shunting any thoughts of spite from her mind. She looked between the two of them and raced out the door at a desperate run.

"Do you have the strength to change back?" Harry asked quietly. "Let me see those wonderful hazel eyes of yours?"

Tonks opened her eyes and smiled, watching Harry's reaction as tears streaked down her cheeks. "I kept my natural color, Love..." she whispered, but shifted to her Marion Baker persona as Harry shifted to James'. "Hermione will take care of you..." she wheezed. "And E-Erin... she p-promised..." Her voice trailed off just as her eyes fluttered closed once again.

"Love? Tonks?!" Harry gently shook her shoulders.

She started awake once again and smiled lovingly at Harry. "T-take c-care of them... H-Harry," she whispered weakly. "Remember, I love... you..."

This time he felt her body go limp in his arms and a sickening feeling gripped his heart. "Wake up! Don't go... please..." Harry pleaded desperately but she didn't respond. Her breathing became weaker and weaker as he broke down, cradling his dying fiancée in his arms.

"Sir, you'll have to sit back," a mediwitch said earnestly as he rocked back and forth with Tonks' limp body in his arms. "We've got to transfer the baby now!"

A pair of strong hands grabbed Harry by the shoulders and dragged him from Tonks as a flurry of white-robed wizards and witches dashed between hers and another bed that had been moved into the room.

"We're losing her!" One of them shouted as their wands waved frantically in the air. Harry watched in stunned silence. He caught Hermione downing several potions before lying back in the other bed and closing her eyes. Harry looked back to Tonks' still form and he fell to the floor, landing hard on his knees as a sadness he never knew existed wracked his body.

"Transfer is complete!" Another mediwitch said as the same strong arms lifted Harry from the floor and pulled him into the hall where a chair was waiting for him. "Check her vitals and make sure she's not rejecting the transplant!" a mediwizard said hurriedly. "Try to stabilize the other!" another mediwitch said urgently before the door closed.

"Harry..." the man's voice whispered in his ear. Harry looked up though the waves of anger, sadness, and tear-blurred vision to find none other than Albus Dumbledore standing before him, a look of profound sadness on the old wizard's face.

"Doesn't it ever end, Professor?" Harry choked with a pathetic sob, having seemingly reverted to the scared little boy that used to live in a cupboard under the stairs at four, Privet Drive.

"I understand that you've captured the one you were after," Dumbledore said quietly. "And I've taken the liberty of finding someone to cover your classes until you're fit to return, if you indeed decide to return..."

“Thank you,” Harry said in a daze, attempting to get to his feet but the old wizard’s grip kept him firmly in place. He looked to his old mentor in confusion and saw something in his eyes. “What is it?”

“You need to come with me,” Albus Dumbledore said sadly, “there’s something you need to know.”

Harry followed behind Dumbledore slowly, not really paying any attention to his surroundings or even in the slightest bit concerned about where he was going. His mind was back in that room with the woman he was in love with, back in the room where his friend had made a selfless decision that had saved his daughter, back to the room where his life both began and ended.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said quietly, causing the young Auror to leave the self-imposed prison of his mind.

He looked around, recognizing another part of the wizarding hospital where his division interrogated dangerous criminals after they’d been injured in a chase. Harry’s eyes immediately settled upon the tall, dark-skinned figure of Kingsley Shacklebolt. He could never read the man’s expression, even when he was happy and Harry’s confused stare prompted the man to speak.

“You’ve captured Malfoy,” his baritone voice announced, breaking the near deafening silence. “Our intelligence shows that we’ve captured or killed every one of the new Death Eaters... plus one.”

“Plus one?” Harry echoed back, still in a bewildered daze.

Kingsley didn’t say anything. Instead, he stepped up to a bare stretch of wall and muttered a charm that made the wall become transparent. Those inside the room couldn’t see out—they saw a bare stretch of wall—but those on the outside, however, could see in.

A tall man in black robes was nervously pacing the otherwise empty room. There weren’t any chairs, beds, or anything else that might provide comfort. Just bare, stone walls and floor.

He kept walking back and forth, seemingly avoiding the transparent wall. Every few seconds, he would fidget, rub his hands together vigorously as if there was something sticky on them, then return to his previous state of pacing the room. He never stood in one place for too long and, from time to time, would scratch or rub at the wall as if there was a smudge that needed to be cleaned.

“Who’s this?” Harry asked dumbly, his interest waning rapidly.

“The one who cursed Tonks,” Dumbledore said quietly.

Harry immediately went rigid, his hands balled into fists and a boiling anger rose from the pit of his stomach faster than a wildfire through dry brush.

“Calm down, potter,” Kingsley said sternly. “We’re going to interrogate him, *not* kill him.”

Harry glared at the tall man but brought himself under control. “Why do you need me here to—” Harry’s jaw dropped in mid sentence when the man in the room turned around. The unmistakable large nose, freckles, and tuft of red hair that poked from under his hood told Harry everything he needed to know. “Let’s get this over with,” he said evenly. Harry was going to find out what happened to his ex-best friend even if it killed them both, and Harry was hoping it was Ron that wouldn’t make it out of that room.

“Keep yourself in check, Harry,” Shacklebolt warned. “We need you for your Occlumency skills, Malfoy killed MacMillan in Diagon Alley and you’re the only other one besides Dumbledore who can do this.”

Harry nodded curtly and followed the other two into the room.

Like a frightened animal, Ronald Weasley scurried back into the corner of the room with a terrified look on his face. That look, however, didn’t last long after he saw Harry. Rage and malice consumed him then and had it not been for Dumbledore’s use of binding rope, Ron would have lunged at him.

“Ron, we’re going to ask questions and you’re going to answer them,” Kingsley said in a commanding voice. “If you refuse, we are authorized to use Veritaserum.”

“I’m not saying anything with *Potter* here!” Ron growled menacingly.

“He’s staying,” Dumbledore said serenely. “Now please answer our questions—”

"I don't have to answer anything!" Ron barked with a laugh that chilled Harry's bones. "My *father* is the Minister of Magic!"

"Your father knows you're here, Ron," Kingsley said calmly and produced a rolled parchment from his robes. "We have his signature to use whatever means necessary to determine your role in this attack... He's been far too lenient with you as it is." Kingsley unrolled the parchment and held it in front of Ron to read. In minutes fresh ink, at the bottom of the paper, was Arthur Weasley's name in all its glory.

Ron paled at the contents on the page which Harry surmised were the orders to use Veritaserum should the need arise. Harry hoped beyond hope that Ron would resist.

"As long as *he's* here, I'm not talking!" Ron growled again with a menacing nod towards Harry. He then clamped his mouth shut, pressing his lips into a thin, white line.

Kingsley sighed and looked to Dumbledore, who nodded slightly.

"**STUPEFY!**" Kingsley said, sending Ron into unconsciousness. Albus stepped up to the young Weasley, retrieved a small vial from his robes, and, after tipping back his head, let three drops of clear liquid fall into his mouth.

"**ENNERVATE!**" he said, pointing his wand at Ron's body. The same reaction Harry had seen when Barty Crouch Jr. had the truth serum applied manifested within Ron. He looked straight ahead with glassy eyes and a blank expression covered his face.

"Ronald, can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked in a serene voice.

"Yes," Ron droned.

"Why were you attacking Diagon Alley?"

"I wasn't," Ron stated flatly.

Harry looked at the other two in confusion, the same expression reflected from their faces.

“Why were you there?” Kingsley asked.

“To truly make Hermione my own,” Ron droned.

“*WHAT?!*” Harry barked in disbelief. “Hermione doesn’t want to see you, what made you think she’d go *back* to you?!”

“The soul-binding curse,” Ron stated matter-of-factly.

Dumbledore’s face went white at the proclamation. “Where did you learn that curse?”

“Malfoy taught it to me,” Ron said without hesitation.

“What happened to you in sixth year at Hogwarts?” Harry asked eagerly, not noticing the grim expression on his old headmaster’s face.

“The brains from the Department of Mysteries... did... something... to me...” Ron said. It was clear he didn’t know exactly what happened either but he attributed it to the brains.

“Who were the girls you beat before you attacked Hermione?” Harry pushed.

“Cho Chang, Marietta Edgecombe,” Ron started in the same zombie-like tone. Harry opened his mouth to ask something else but Ron continued talking. “Hannah Abbot, two Americans—I didn’t catch their names, Lavender Brown, Parvati and Padma Patil... I couldn’t wake Parvati up—”

Harry’s anger got the best of him as his balled fist exploded against Ron’s jaw, sending him sprawling across the room. Amazingly, Ron continued to mumble—though his jaw was now dislocated—and continued listing more and more names.

“*YOU BLOODY BASTARD!*” Harry roared as he stalked towards Ron’s prone form but he stopped and stared in disbelief at Ron’s next words.

“Luna Lovegood, Hermione Granger... Hermione, the memory charms worked, didn't they, Love?” he mumbled incoherently. “You'll never know what I did... Potter will never have children with you after that...”

Blind rage took over Harry at this point and he lunged for the babbling redhead on the floor. He was stopped mid leap by a well-timed levitation spell and suddenly knocked unconscious.

Harry woke with a start, flailing his arms as if he were still fighting for his life. The lights in the room were dimmed and he was sitting in a very comfortable chair reminiscent of the ones that Dumbledore had conjured at the Ministry of Magic so many years ago.

“Are you calm enough to hear what happened after your attack on Mr. Weasley?” Dumbledore's voice echoed from the shadows.

At the mention of Ron's name everything he'd said in the interrogation room flooded back into his mind. “Where is the ruddy bastard?!” Harry growled angrily. “I'm going to wring the life from his useless hide!”

“You will do no such thing, Harry,” Dumbledore quipped sadly. “Where he's going will be far worse than death...”

Harry looked at the wizened wizard with his now accustomed vision. “Azkaban?” Harry asked gratingly.

“For life,” Albus replied in a tired voice. “The spell he used is a derivation of the killing curse when used on someone it's not harmonized to,” he explained. “We found a bag of Miss Granger's hair clippings on Ron when we brought him in for treatment and questioning. The soul-binding spell would have removed her free will and left her a zombie to everyone but the caster.”

Panic rose in Harry's throat. “And he hit Tonks...” he whispered hoarsely.

“Normally the curse would have killed the caster as well since Tonks wasn't the intended target. He botched one of the components, which one? I am uncertain. Because of this, he will live while Tonks will

slowly die... The use of the spell is banned and labeled an unforgivable because it uses a combination of the killing curse and imperius. Soul-binding merges the souls of the caster and the target, unless the target is unintended in which case they normally both die.”

“But in Ron’s incompetence, he hit Tonks instead and while *he* LIVES *TONKS DIES?!’*” Harry said evenly ending in a bellowing rage.

“Who cast the enervation charms on her after she was hit?” Dumbledore asked calmly.

Harry looked at him, forcing the red rage from his vision by closing his eyes and concentrating. “I-I did,” he said.

“You saved the life of your unborn child,” Albus said with the tone of a proud grandfather. “When the baby was transferred, the drain on Tonks lessened... Go to her and we’ll talk more afterwards...”

Harry didn’t need to be told twice. As soon as the command was given, he ran straight for the room and opened the door gently. Tonks was still in her bed, gasping harshly and most of the color gone from her face. Hermione was still unconscious in the next bed over.

“H-Harry?” Tonks’ raspy voice sounded weak but the booming silence in the room amplified it a thousand fold.

“I’m here, Love,” Harry said compassionately as he crossed the room to her side once again. “I’m here always...”

Tonks’ hand patted the bed feebly, searching for his. On instinct, he took her hand and gently laced his fingers with hers. Her skin was ice cold and felt strange in his tender grip. Harry’s heart shattered when he looked into her eyes to find that even though she was dying, the twinkles in her eyes had somehow increased since he’d last looked into them.

“It feels strange without Erin...” she wheezed. “I... I miss her, Love...”

“I know,” Harry choked as his tears ran freely down his cheeks. “She’s going to miss her mum...”

“Harry... don’t,” she said firmly. “Don’t dwell on this... live...”

“I don’t know if I can...” Harry said through his tears. “We’ve been there for each other for so long...”

Tonks smiled serenely, a strange smile that Harry seemed to dread. She tugged weakly on his hand and, understanding what she wanted, Harry bent and kissed her tenderly. When he pulled away, tears were raining down her cheeks. Tonks was gazing back at him with such love in her beautiful hazel eyes that Harry couldn’t control the anguished sob that suddenly escaped his lips. “Go to Hermione... I’ll always love you... Har... ry...” she said as her eyes closed for the last time.

He looked down at her limp hand and watched as her last breath rattled from her lungs with those final words still ringing in his ears. Unable to hold back his grief, he sat on the bed and gently cradled her limp body to him. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder as he began to rock Tonks’ body slowly and he whispered, “no,” over and over again.

The last thing anyone would have suspected on a bright, sunny Christmas day was to be standing in the middle of a graveyard listening to words that nobody should hear at such a joyous time of the year.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

Harry’s tear-clouded vision kept him from truly witnessing the wizarding cremation ceremony as Tonks’ elegant coffin was engulfed in a bonfire of violently pink flames. Tearful laughter then cries of grief filled the air when everyone present witnessed their friend’s favorite hair color rise into the air.

Harry’s knees had given out and he sat in one of the chairs provided for the mourners as Molly Weasley enveloped him in a tight, maternal hug. She like many, if not all, of the attendees was crying freely. When Molly had been told about Harry’s relationship with Tonks, the woman wept for him for hours. Ginny was there as well, sharing in the hug and the anguished tears. Those Weasley males that were

present were standing close by, holding their wives or girlfriends as well as providing support for Harry in his time of need.

Hermione, however, seemed to be taking things far worse. She wept for Harry and for herself. She'd lost two good friends that day and Harry's depression seemed to be drawing him away from her as well. It was obvious that she was still working through the hormone acceleration potions she needed after the transfer of Tonks' baby, and the added chemistry made it hard for her to keep her emotions in check.

"AUROR'S AT THE READY!" Kingsley Shacklebolt boomed into the chilled morning air. "AIM!" Twenty-one Aurors lifted their wands to the sky in military salute. "FIRE!" At Kingsley's command, balls of multicolored light shot into the air and with a deafening bang, exploded into showers of sparks. "FIRE!" Harry flinched at each explosion and he could feel the others around him doing the same. "FIRE!" Everyone present had been in the war, but the sound echoing around them was not an indication of a life-or-death situation. "FIRE!" Each of these explosions was a tribute to a fallen comrade, a fallen friend... a lost love. "COMPANY! SA-LUTE!"

Bagpipes began playing their familiar, grinding melody as Tonks' ashes were magically placed within an exquisite urn. It too sported violent pinks and other clashing colors in memory of the wild-spirited woman's fashion statements while she'd lived. The bagpipes soon died away on a single, gasping, haunting note and Harry looked up with watery eyes.

"Tonks leaves behind a loving fiancée and an unborn child," Dumbledore said as his voice caught in his throat. "She was brave to a fault and died after saving one of her friends in the thick of battle. Tonks was a happy soul in life, and if I may say so, I think she's looking down upon everyone here, happy that she was so... loved... by so many..." the old wizard paused to collect himself as he reached for the colorful urn. He lifted it gently, as if retrieving an infant, and approached Harry in a slow, measured walk indicative of a ritual that was steeped in tradition. With steady hands, Dumbledore presented Tonks' urn to the stricken young man and offered him a soft smile.

Harry reached for her remains with trembling hands and took the ceramic container gently into his embrace.

"Wherever she is, Harry," Dumbledore said with more compassion than Harry had ever heard from the old man, "she's watching over you with love..."

"Thank you," Harry choked, not looking up or away from the scorched earth where Tonks' headstone would reside.

"Harry, these were Tonks' badge, wand, and communication crystal," Kingsley said next, stepping in front of the grieving man. "The Ministry of Magic and the Auror Division present you these as a token of our respect for you and for Tonks."

Harry took the items with a slight nod and held them in his free hand.

"Please, join us at the Three Broomsticks to wish Tonks a safe journey in her new life..." Dumbledore said to the gathering. With Arthur and Molly's help, Harry got to his feet and they walked slowly with everyone to the wizarding pub.

Witches and wizards laughed as they told stories about Tonks' legendary clumsiness. Even more tales were fond memories of when she'd cheer them up with a pig's snout or by changing the color of her hair to something unnatural.

Harry smiled with everyone else as the stories were told, but his eyes kept wandering to their booth and tears would start to flow again. He looked over to Hermione, who was talking quietly with Ginny. She looked up and gave a sympathetic smile. Harry stood then, and walked over to her. "Can we talk?" he asked timidly.

Hermione nodded and Ginny left the two of them to work things out.

"I-I wanted to thank you," he whispered, "for helping with the baby... I know you were angry with us for deceiving you like we did..."

"I'm not going to pretend that I'm fine with what happened," Hermione replied softly. "But whether you two were James and Marion or Harry and Tonks, you were both there for me when I needed friends." She

paused to wipe the tears from her eyes and took the offered handkerchief from Harry. "Don't get me wrong, I'm furious with you," she sobbed, "and hurts that you didn't tell me..."

"I know," Harry said quietly. "I don't expect you to want to continue our friendship after everything that's happened—"

"Don't be daft!" Hermione said incredulously. "Just after I get you back in my life, do you think I'm going to throw you away?!"

Harry looked up with hope and reached out tentatively for the crying best friend he'd missed for so long. When he faltered and attempted to pull back, Hermione flung her arms around him and hugged him for all she was worth. That was the catalyst that caused the two of them to burst into tears.

"I miss her too, Harry, I really do..." Hermione choked out as he wept onto her shoulder. "I'm so sorry this happened! She seemed so happy..."

"She was," Harry said after a moment. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you straight away... I was going to tell you today..."

Hermione's hug tightened even further as did Harry's and after a few minutes, they pulled apart and smiled softly at one another.

"Give me some time, Harry," Hermione said gently. "I need to work this out and get used to the baby..."

Harry nodded as he wiped the tears from his cheeks. "Take all the time you want, Hermione; I'm not going anywhere..."

Molly set her hand comfortingly on Harry's shoulder and he looked up to the motherly smile on her face. "Are you ready to go home?"

"I-I don't think I can go back to the house, Mrs. Weasley..." Harry said sadly.

"Then you'll have to come back to the Burrow with us," she replied with a sniffle. The mention of Ron's childhood home caused Harry's mood to darken and the Weasley matron picked up on it immediately.

“Don’t worry, dear, you can have Percy’s old room,” she said sadly, “we’re closing off *his* room...” she added angrily.

Harry shook off his anger and looked to the faces of the other Weasleys that had made their way to the table without his knowing. They were looking at him eagerly and he could see they all supported the decision their mother had made.

He smiled at his surrogate family and nodded. “I don’t think I can go back to the house right now...” he said again, tears beginning to well in his eyes as scenes of Tonks sleeping on the sofa, squatting in the garden potting flowers, her bright smiles, laying next to him in bed, and several other special moments flashed in his mind. “I-I can’t...” he said hoarsely and Molly pulled him into another hug.

“You won’t have to, Harry dear,” she said tenderly. “Why don’t we go back to the Burrow for some tea and we’ll get you settled in?”

“We can take care of the house for you,” Fred said quietly.

“That’s right,” George piped in. “Don’t worry about a thing, Harry.”

The next few hours were a blur for Harry as they all apparated back to the Burrow. Fred, George, Ginny and Bill had gone to the house he and Tonks had shared and packed everything up the next day. Harry remained in his new room gazing longingly at a picture of Tonks while he caressed her face. The photo Tonks smiled back at him and seemed to lean into his finger each time it touched the glass.

“Harry?” Ginny’s voice wafted in quietly from the door. “Professor Dumbledore is here to see you...”

“I’ll be right there,” Harry said absently and smiled lovingly at the photo. “I’ll be back, Love,” he whispered before planting a kiss on the glass. He heard a whimper and turned to see Ginny rush from the doorway. With a deep sigh, he wiped his eyes dry and went to the kitchen where Albus Dumbledore sat, nursing a mug of hot cocoa.

“Harry, I see you’re keeping your strength up,” he said with a faint smile.

Harry shrugged and sat at the table. "Tonks wouldn't want me to let myself go," he said quietly. "That's one of the promises we made to each other..."

The headmaster nodded quietly. "I'm here about two things," he explained. "First, I wanted to let you know we can find a replacement for you at the school, I'm sure you'll want the rest of the time to work through your loss—"

"No," Harry said immediately. "No, that's fine, just give me a few weeks, I'm sure Snape can handle the class until then... does anyone know I'm James Baker?"

"We haven't let anyone else know," Dumbledore said quietly.

"Good," Harry said. "I'll finish the year out as James Baker, we'll let the curse live on this last year... I'll return as myself next year if that's fine with you."

"That's more than fine, Harry," Albus said with a smile. "But what about your Auror position, I heard they gave you a promotion and a raise..."

"My reason for being an Auror has ended," Harry said with a sigh. "We've caught all of Voldemort's supporters, at least the ones we knew existed, and my fight is ended... it's time I teach others to protect themselves so another 'Harry Potter' or 'Albus Dumbledore' won't be needed."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded his understanding. "Very well said, Harry," he said with pride. "Now, on to the other business... I've discovered exactly what went wrong with our young Mr. Weasley."

Harry looked up from his mug, which had been set there by Molly before she left the room, and gazed at the old wizard inquisitively, though his face was hard and unreadable.

"As you recall, I had to use Legilimency to help Mr. Weasley with his issues after the fight at the Department of Mysteries. The being that attached itself to him fused conflicting emotions and thoughts in his mind and amplified many of his own insecurities—"

"I thought you *cured* him of their effects," Harry asked evenly.

"I believed I had," Dumbledore replied, "but I missed one thing... his obsession with you."

"He was *obsessed* with me?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Each of the women he'd named had a connection to you in some way, be it friendship or romance..." Dumbledore explained. "Apparently, he was so obsessed with having everything you did that he'd gone around to each of them and attempted to bring them under his control. Two of those women died during the process and you know what happened to Miss Granger..."

"Needless to say, he used several memory charms on each of his victims to cover up his activities. Miss Lovegood did not survive when she resisted him, the same with Miss Patil... also during this time, he'd been gambling quite furiously in an attempt to obtain wealth—"

"Wait!" Harry said confusedly. "*Ron* tortured these girls because they'd showed interest in me? And what *exactly* did he do to Hermione?!"

Dumbledore sighed and nodded thoughtfully. "While you were in school, what were the issues between the two of you?"

"In fourth year he was jealous of my *fame and fortune*," Harry spat sarcastically. "I thought he'd gotten over that after the first task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament!"

"He buried those feelings, yes, but the dark creature that attacked him enhanced those feelings to extreme levels. Paranoia had also settled in, if you recall the difficult time I experienced sorting through his memories and removing the harmful ones to his pensieve..." Harry nodded. "He'd managed to hide several things from me. The first was a near insane jealousy of you that apparently turned to hatred... he'd hidden those feelings well and once out from under the watchful gaze of his parents, began to collect things that would make him your better."

“Thus, he turned to gambling. It’s been reported that he spent several hours a day at horse and dog tracks, betting on Quidditch games and the like... within the span of three years, he was able to amass a rather large sum of money, nearly rivaling your parents’ trust. During this time, he was using memory charms on Miss Granger to keep her questions at bay, then eventually to control her.”

“I think she still looks to the clock every day at two,” Harry growled angrily. “What about his status as keeper of the Canons?”

“He was never on any professional Quidditch team,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “That was one of his many lies that he’d propagated.”

“How will the memory charms affect Hermione? What about the baby?” Harry asked concernedly and in rapid succession.

“She’ll be fine, Harry,” Dumbledore said with a reassuring smile, “as will your child. She’s currently at St. Mungo’s undergoing treatment and should be released within the next few days. The returning memories are going to be tough for her to handle at first—”

“You don’t even have to ask me to be there for her,” Harry said immediately. “*I knew something was wrong!* Hermione would never willingly submit to Ron’s lies!”

“As to what he’d done to her, pertaining to having children...” Dumbledore said warily. “He found a way to remove her uterus. Madam Pomfrey informed me of this when Hermione requested treatment. The most the school nurse could do was relieve the pain, but when she offered to carry your child, the mediwizards at St. Mungo’s had to transfer Tonks’ uterus as well...”

Harry buried his face in his hands. “The pain was all in her head... Hermione told me that her mother had problems conceiving and she would as well...” he groaned miserably as his anger began to build once again. “I knew about her ‘stomach problems’ but why didn’t Susan catch that?”

“It seems Ron cast a memory charm on her as well...” Albus said with a sigh. “He was rather thorough when it came to his cover-ups and those he couldn’t manipulate were pushed from their lives...”

“Like me, his family, her family...” Harry growled angrily. “What’s going to happen to him?”

“He’s going to Azkaban for life,” Dumbledore said sadly. “Due to his mental condition, he’s being spared the Dementor’s Kiss.”

“Did Mr. Weasley have a hand in that?” Harry asked quietly.

“No, I didn’t,” Mr. Weasley said from the doorway. “I’m going to miss my son, Harry, but what he’s done over the past few years is inexcusable. I do not condone the Kiss on anyone! It’s not our right to take the soul of another person. Though Ron is my son, and I still love him, he’ll pay for the misery he’s inflicted on others.”

Harry saw the pain in the older man’s eyes and understood that he wasn’t the only one who’d lost a loved one recently. The Weasleys had effectively lost Ron three years prior. Harry set a comforting hand on Arthur’s arm and nodded, letting him know that he understood what he was going through. Harry, after all, nearly lost his own child and that thought brought back all the memories of Tonks that he’d been keeping in the back of his mind during their conversation.

“When’s the trial then?” Harry asked quietly.

“In four days,” Arthur said solemnly. “If you and Hermione were there to testify—”

Harry nodded swiftly, not letting his surrogate father finish the thought. “I’ll be there,” Harry said evenly. “I can’t speak for Hermione, however...”

“Now that that’s settled,” Dumbledore said after clearing his throat. “Do you have any lesson plans for the few weeks you’ll be gone?”

“I have them in their respective cubicles,” Harry said absently. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m rather tired...”

“Of course, Harry,” Albus said softly.

Harry left the table and headed for his room once again. He didn't get any farther than the bottom of the stairs before Ginny called to him from the sitting room.

"Harry?" she said.

"Hey, Ginny," Harry said as he walked over to her. He knew she'd listened in on the conversation and before he knew what he was doing, had her in a tight hug. "He didn't do anything to you, did he?" Harry asked concernedly.

"No," she whimpered on his shoulder, clutching at him desperately. "I can't believe what happened to Ron..."

"I know, neither can I," Harry said quietly as he rubbed her back.

"Don't shut yourself in your room, Harry," Ginny pleaded quietly. "Don't shut us out, let us help you..."

"It hurts, Gin," Harry said softly. "She told me to go to Hermione... can you believe that? Like I'd just abandon her memory like that—"

"She wanted you to *live*, Harry," Ginny interrupted softly as she pulled away and cupped his cheek. "Tonks wanted you to be *happy* and continue *living*... she didn't want you cooped up in a room talking to her photograph as if it were her..."

Harry fought back the hurt and anger Ginny's words were causing and he nodded despite his feelings. "I know," Harry said evenly, but softened. "I love her, Gin, it's not going to just go away," he said as he rubbed irritably at his eyes. "I need time... maybe... maybe I'll explore something with Hermione later, but now?" He shook his head sadly. "Thinking about that now is impossible..."

Ginny's tears had fallen again at the pain in his eyes and the profound sadness that had overcome her friend. "We uprooted the garden and shrunk it down for you," she said warmly and handed him what looked like a fish tank. Inside was the garden that Tonks had started to plant before it had gotten too cold outside. They were planning on casting a greenhouse charm to keep the flowers alive during the winter, but never got the chance.

Harry marveled at the now miniaturized garden and a slight smile brightened his face momentarily as he remembered how excited Tonks was when she started working in the flowerbeds.

Tonks beamed at his praise and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm glad you like it," she said excitedly, "there are lilies, asters, and acacias here." She pointed animatedly to her right and left.

"I like the daffodils you've set off by the... gardenias?" Harry asked, looking at the small arrangement.

"Yes, gardenias," Tonks said, squatting next to him. "I couldn't decide if I liked the jonquil or mimosas better so I bought them both and they fit wonderfully well here..." She pointed around the daffodils to a trail of differing flowers that eventually led to a pair of new rose bushes.

"White and Red roses?" Harry asked as he bent to sniff at a bloomed red rose. "You're really getting into this, aren't you?" he asked with a laugh.

Tonks wrapped her arms around him from behind as he plucked one of the rose blooms from the bush. "We're going to be here for a while... I can't just sit around and read all day..." she said with a wide smile as he slipped the flower into her hair.

Harry wiped at the tears that had somehow found their way to his cheeks and he looked at Ginny with a soft smile. "Thank you," he choked out as she enveloped him in another hug.

"I did some research on the flowers and each of them had one theme," she whispered in his ear. "They all say that she loved you very much, Harry, each and every one... she'll always love you and you need to take her advice..." Ginny stepped back and wiped her own tears away. *"Live, Harry..."*

Harry nodded slowly and made his way back to his room. He set the miniaturized garden on the bedside table next to a photo of Harry and Tonks from their trip to the Caribbean. He retrieved the visage of Tonks he had been talking to earlier and let his tears fall freely once again. With a kiss to the glass, where the smiling woman's cheek had moved, Harry crawled under his covers and curled into a tight ball.

"Goodnight, Love," he whispered just before his emotionally drained body dragged him into unconsciousness. The last thing he saw before his world went black was Tonks smiling and waving happily to him.

"Harry!" Tonks said with a playful laugh as she emerged from the surf. Harry was laughing heartily as well, watching his beautiful fiancée fight against the waves that kept knocking her down. With a wide smile on his face, he ran into the ocean and helped her stand in the water.

"I've missed you so much, Love," Harry said quietly as he caressed her cheek. He smiled as he felt her soft lips press into his palm.

"I'm right here," Tonks said lovingly and placed a hand over his heart. "I'll always be with you, Love."

Harry couldn't contain himself and leaned in to kiss her. Her lips were as soft as he remembered, as moist, and her kiss every bit as comforting. He felt her arms encircle his neck as she deepened their kiss and he sighed happily when they parted.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself, Love," Tonks said tenderly, stroking his tearstained cheek. "You have to let go..."

"I can't," he said with a sob. "I can't let you go, I love you so much!"

"I love you too, Harry," she said compassionately, "but you have to move on... Erin's going to need her daddy... Hermione needs her best friend..." Tonks pulled out of their hug, even though Harry tried desperately to cling to her. "Let me go, Harry... live your life, My Love..."

"DON'T GO!" Harry sobbed as he reached blindly in the dark. He gasped for air and looked around desperately only to realize that he had been dreaming... again.

"Harry dear, is everything ok?" Molly asked through the door.

When Harry didn't answer straight away, she opened the door a crack and found him clutching his pillow to him as if his life depended

on it. She stepped into the room and sat next to him on the bed. Quietly, she smoothed his unruly hair and sat patiently as she had countless times when her own children had nightmares. Eventually, his sobbing receded and he cleared his throat.

“Sorry...” he croaked.

“Hush, no need to be sorry, it’s only natural,” Molly cooed gently as she continued to brush his hair from his forehead. “It’s been three weeks, hardly any time for you to get over her...”

“I’m going to her grave today,” he said quietly. “I have to make sure she’s warm...”

“Harry, she’s in a place where she’ll always be warm,” Mrs. Weasley said quietly. “She lives in your heart and she’ll live on in your child... will you be visiting Hermione again today?”

“She needs me,” Harry said immediately. “Erin needs me, they both do, I can’t abandon them...”

“Erin?” Molly asked perplexed.

“My daughter,” Harry said quietly. “Tonks told me that we were having a daughter and she named her Erin...”

“Oh, Harry...” Molly said sadly and pulled him into a hug. “That’s a beautiful name.”

Harry pulled out of the embrace reluctantly and looked her in the eyes. “Mrs. Weasley—”

“I’ll have no Mrs. Weasley out of you,” she said sternly. “Call me Molly.”

“I-I can’t just yet,” he said seriously. “But I’ll try... I just wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Anything, Harry.”

“My parents have been gone for some time and so have Tonks’... I consider you the mother I never knew and was wondering if you’d act as Erin’s grandmother...”

Molly’s hand shot to her mouth at Harry’s request. “I’d love to!” she said with a sob and gathered him in one of her famous bone-crushing hugs.

“I was hoping Mr. Weasley would do the same...” Harry said quietly, a smile playing at his lips.

“I’m sure Arthur would be delighted!” Molly said happily as tears streaked down her cheeks. “We’ll tell him in the morning!”

Harry sighed and pulled from their embrace once more. “Thank you,” he said tiredly and lay back down.

“We’ll see you in the morning, Harry,” Molly said with a sniffle. “Erin is going to have one hell of a father!”

Harry smiled at the declaration as he slipped off to sleep once again.

"How was your session today?" Harry asked concernedly over his steaming cup of tea. Hermione had stopped by the Burrow to help 'James' get settled in the castle. One article or another had reminded them so much of Tonks or Marion they had to stop and take a breather.

"They're going a bit smoother," Hermione said softly, closing her eyes in an attempt to chase off the images that kept tormenting her. After the excellent mediwizards in St. Mungo's removed her memory charms, Hermione had become somewhat withdrawn and twitchy around other people, specifically men. Though she didn't react as badly with Harry as she did everyone else, she still had issues when he was nearby for too long. "I just wish I could get these images out of my head for good..." she said sadly.

"I should have told you that day," Harry whispered. "If I had, this wouldn't have happened, Tonks wouldn't be—"

"You stop right there, Harry James Potter!" Hermione scolded. "You are not going to blame this all on yourself!" Harry opened his mouth to protest. "No! I'm not going to let you do the same thing you did when Sirius died! *Ron* is the one to blame for all this, not you!"

Harry sighed but unwillingly nodded his head. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I know this is just as hard, if not harder, on you as it is on me..." He took a sip of his tea and sighed miserably.

"Harry, it doesn't look like you've been sleeping well," she said softly and though her hand was shaking like a leaf, she set it gently on his arm. "Are you still dreaming about her?"

Harry replied with tears and a nod, not looking up from his cup. "It's been a month and it still feels like I held her just a few minutes ago," he whispered. "I just don't dream about her, Hermione, I see her when I'm awake, I smell her when a warm breeze passes by... I miss her so much it's driving me mad!"

“Harry,” Hermione said sadly, pain evident in her voice. “I miss her too. She’s here, watching over you... she’s never really left and Tonks is trying to let you know that...”

“But she keeps telling me to let her go each night!” Harry said exasperatedly. “I finally get to hold her again, to kiss her, and for what? To wake up in the middle of the night pleading for her not to go...”

Hermione sighed and withdrew her hand, only to clasp both of them nervously on the table. Subconsciously, she looked to her barely protruding stomach and ran a hand over it gently. “I can’t believe that she’s given me a chance to be a mother,” she said quietly. Tears began to stream from her eyes and she closed them tightly. “Why did it have to happen?” she asked with a trembling voice.

Remembering what her therapist had told him, Harry gently slid his hand up her arm to her shoulder. He knew she needed a hug and this way, he could let her know he was there so she could make her own decision concerning the closeness. Hermione was slow to react, but after a moment, she wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace. Harry gently stroked her hair and whispered softly in her ear, “I don’t know... I just don’t know. But everything will turn out well.”

“How can you know?” she asked quietly, her voice muffled by the wool of his jumper. “After everything that’s happened, how can you know?”

“It’s just a feeling,” Harry replied softly. “Something deep in my gut tells me everything will be fine.”

They didn’t know how long they’d been hugging each other. Was it minutes or hours? Neither of them could recall. Harry just knew that Hermione needed him and he needed her. They were interrupted by someone clearing their throat, and Hermione pulled away to face their visitor.

“Do you need any help with the move?” Ginny asked quietly from the door. She’d just come in from outside and her normally alabaster skin was pink from the cold, winter wind. She smiled softly at her two friends and looked outside expectantly.

"I think we'll be fine," Harry said with a slightly curious smile. "What are you looking for?"

Ginny turned around quickly and nervously looked at the two of them. "I... uh—"

"Is that Neville?" Hermione asked somewhat nervously as a tall, round-faced man stepped up to the door. He looked worried and glanced through the glass at Harry and Hermione before giving Ginny a questioning look.

"Do you want to go into the sitting room, Hermione?" Harry asked concernedly.

"N-no..." she stammered. "I need to face this or I'll never get better," she said with determination and steeled herself for Neville's entrance.

Ginny looked at them nervously again, but opened the door for their old housemate.

"Hi," he said somewhat awkwardly. "H-how are you holding up? I was at the service, it was beautiful..."

Harry's shoulder's sank somewhat but he stood and shook Neville's hand as warmly as he could. "I'm getting along," Harry said with a shrug. "It's hard, you know..."

"I can't say that I understand your pain," Neville replied with a sad look. "But if you ever need a friend, Harry, you know where I am."

Harry forced a smile for Neville's benefit and they invited him in to a cup of tea and some biscuits that Hermione had baked earlier. "How're things going in your life, Neville?" Harry asked in an attempt to shift the conversation from Tonks and how sorry everyone was about her passing. "I hear you'll be going to work with aquatic plant life?"

Neville smiled brightly after taking a sip of his tea. "Professor Sprout clued me into an internship at the London Botanical Research Institute!" he explained excitedly. "They've only been around for the past three years and when I started looking for something to do with

my life she pointed me to their offices. I don't know what happened, but after the first meeting, they offered me a full position instead of an internship and the next thing I knew, I was at Loch Ness studying seaweed that was thought to be extinct!"

"That's wonderful, Neville," Hermione smiled nervously at him.

"I just stopped by to take Ginny out to celebrate with dinner," Neville said and grinned sheepishly at Harry and Hermione's wide eyes.

"They didn't know yet, Neville," Ginny said quickly.

"It's ok, Ginny," Harry said with a smile. "I'm happy you're dating again!" He stood and hugged Ginny tightly. "I don't think your mum will have the garden gnomes toss *him* over the hedge..."

"Harry!" Ginny said with a laugh. She pulled back and regarded her friend seriously. "Are you ok with this then?"

"Of course I am!" Harry said feigning hurt. "Listen, you two head out and have fun, enjoy yourselves while you can..."

"He's right," Hermione said with a smile and hugged Ginny as well. "Congratulations, you two!"

"Th-thanks," Neville said with a blush. "I'm sorry we can't stay longer, reservations and all..."

"No apologies necessary," Harry said with a clap to Neville's shoulder. "Just take good care of her, Longbottom, or you'll have me to answer to!"

Ginny and Hermione both snorted and Neville grinned widely. "Don't worry, I'm not Malfoy," he said seriously. "Ready to go, Ginny?"

She nodded and with one more look to her two friends—who nodded that it was alright—she took Neville's arm and the two left for their night on the town.

"I'm glad she's found someone," Harry said with a grin. "She was getting a bit depressing, really..."

Hermione scoffed at his remark and the two of them broke into laughter. "Let's get the rest of your things ready to move," Hermione said after a few moments, both of them feeling slightly better than they had just a mere fifteen minutes prior. "We've got a busy day tomorrow..."

Reluctantly, Harry followed Hermione to his room where they busied themselves with boxes for what Harry was bringing with him to the school. A few hours later, Harry, as James, and Hermione were trudging through the snow and gazing at the inviting lights shining in the windows of Hogwarts. Harry's gaze immediately flitted to Gryffindor Tower and memories of his school days returned in full force. His heart ached for those simpler times when Ron was still his best friend and Hermione was whole, but growing up had complicated their lives very quickly.

"You coming?" Hermione's concerned voice broke through his reverie and he smiled in reply.

"Just remembering," he returned softly. The warmed fish tank in his arms reminded him that he needed to get inside before the charm failed and, walking slowly, he reentered the castle.

Harry's quarters were actually rather comfortable. He had about the same amount of space as the Gryffindor common room and more than enough space for his meager belongings. There was no question where everything was to be placed and after an hour, Harry looked around the room with a hollow satisfaction. Against the advice of others, he'd brought pictures of Tonks in her Marion persona and his favorite one was on his nightstand where he could see her clearly every morning.

A knock came at his door and he absently invited his visitor to join him.

"I thought you might have brought her pictures along," Hermione said quietly as she joined him on the side of his bed. She sighed miserably as Tonks smiled back at the two of them then waved happily from her frame. "I wish I could have thanked you for everything, Tonks," she whispered with a slight smile.

"If it weren't for her, I wouldn't have plucked up the courage to see you," Harry whispered.

"If it weren't for her, I would have been visiting your grave instead of sitting beside you," Hermione said quietly.

"I don't know how she managed to carry me all the way to the school with both a broken leg and arm," Harry said softly. "Thank you, Love," he whispered again and set the photo in its rightful place on his nightstand. "You helped me defeat Voldemort, and she made sure I got back..."

"How did I help you defeat him?" Hermione asked with a baffled look. "After everything—"

"Let's not get into that again," Harry said with a sigh. "You weren't there physically, but knowing you were safe was all that mattered to me. Voldemort said some things that I couldn't... wouldn't let happen. The next thing I knew, I was standing over his smoking ashes..."

"Is that when Tonks found you?" Hermione asked quietly, not willing to hear what the Dark Lord had been planning to do to her.

"No, Lucius Malfoy and Draco found me first..." Harry explained quietly. "Those two worked well together, but Dobby killed Lucius before he could use the killing curse on me."

"Dobby killed a wizard?!" Hermione asked in surprise.

"There's a little known clause in the magical contract of House-Elves," Harry said with a shrug. "Dobby had the right to return the cruelties his former master had visited upon him before he'd been set free. Lucius couldn't withstand the punishment of thirty some-odd years of torture and abuse..."

"Draco, however, wasn't so lucky. I still don't know how he had the strength to apparate after I'd finished with him, but he made it out of there alive... We've been tracking him ever since, trying to capture the git."

“When I found out that Ginny had been dating him, I let Mr. Weasley know and, well, you know what happened after that... After the gnomes threw him off the property, he went into hiding.”

“But when did Tonks find you?” Hermione pressed.

Harry sighed and looked to the smiling picture once again. “I almost died,” he admitted. “They’d used more than the Cruciatus Curse on me. It seems that the Malfoys don’t entirely hate Muggles and their ways. They’d brought some equipment with them that I’d rather not remember. I had to have them put in a pensieve to keep my sanity...” Harry stopped what he was saying as he remembered something.

“What is it?”

“I forgot to get your Christmas present,” Harry said apologetically. “But I do have something for you.” Harry went to his closet and returned with an exquisite wooden box. “I can’t believe I forgot I’d gotten you this...”

Hermione looked at him curiously as he set the box on a table near the bed. She lifted the lid when he indicated and tears began to sting her eyes.

“A pensieve?” she asked haltingly. “These are expensive, Harry...”

“I knew you couldn’t afford one,” he admitted, “but it was suggested that your therapy included pensieve sessions. I picked it up the other day when I was waiting for you, but with everything that’s happened, I’d forgotten.”

“You shouldn’t have—”

“I know I didn’t *have* to,” Harry said quickly, cutting her off. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you... but you are going to accept this gift and you’re going to get better... You need your sleep and if this is the only way to rid yourself of those memories without resorting to memory charms...”

“I don’t know what to say,” Hermione said as she turned the stone bowl over in her hands.

“Don’t say anything,” Harry said with a smile. “Just get better...”

With one swift motion, Hermione set the pensieve on the bed and hugged Harry tightly. “Thank you,” she whispered into his chest as he hugged her in return.

“It’s the least I can do after everything I’ve done—”

“We’ll get to that later, Harry,” Hermione said softly as she pulled away. “I should go to my suite and start on this. Classes have been hell and now I can finally get some peace...”

Harry watched as she took her gift and walked to the door. She turned just before leaving and smiled gently at him. “Get some sleep tonight, Harry... If you need anything, you know where I’m at.”

“Just remember, I’ll be James starting tomorrow,” Harry said with a smirk. Hermione grinned slightly and with a sniff, left the room.

Harry sat for an indeterminable amount of time, looking into the spacious suite he’d been assigned at the castle. His heart ached for the woman that was smiling happily with or without him on the different shelves and other flat surfaces throughout the room.

The evening feast flashed through his mind again and he sighed miserably.

“Professor Baker, I’m terribly sorry to hear what happened to your wife,” Professor Flitwick said with deep concern. “Just know that if you need a friend, I or any of the other professors are here for you.”

“Thank you, Professor Flitwick,” Harry said absently as he stared into his stew. He swirled the thick juices with his spoon before finally deciding to take a bite.

Harry didn’t look from his place setting during most of the meal and when he heard the Headmaster dismiss the students, he sighed and pushed back from the table.

“Excuse me, Professor Baker?” an energetic fourth year girl from Hufflepuff said timidly.

He looked up and smiled slightly for her benefit. "How can I help you, Bethany?"

"I-I just wanted to say thank you," she said with tears coming to her eyes. "You saved my little brother and sister from those hags on Knockturn Alley..."

"You're welcome," Harry said with a faint smile. "How are they doing?"

"They're both fine and are looking forward to seeing you at Hogwarts next year," Bethany replied with a smile. "They can't stop talking about how brave you were... I-I saw what happened with your wife, I'm terribly sorry, sir."

"Thank you, Bethany," Harry said wanly but smiled all the same. "I'm sure she's happy your brother and sister are safe, as am I."

Bethany smiled at him then, and with a wave ran off to join her classmates.

Harry wasn't prepared to face anyone that had witnessed the attack or Tonks' subsequent fall, but he guessed it was inevitable. Wiping away the tears he hadn't realized were falling, he retreated from the hall only to be stopped by the last person he wanted to see.

"Professor Baker," Snape said with a sneer planted on his face.

"Severus," Harry said with a curt nod and stepped around the potions master. He froze when Snape's hand landed on his shoulder.

"Try to be strong," Severus whispered so only Harry could hear. "I know something of pain... The children need your strength."

Before Harry could utter a word, Snape disappeared into the halls that led to the dungeons. He stood in baffled silence before Hermione stepped into the room looking rather nervous.

"What happened?" she asked with a concerned look towards the dungeons.

“You think you know someone,” Harry whispered, “and then something creeps into the light...”

“Did he say anything to you?” Hermione asked worriedly. The last thing she needed was to have Harry cursing Snape into a puddle of goo.

“Nothing bad,” Harry admitted and explained the brief words from the one man he’d loathed the most during his own stay here.

“That was a surprise,” Hermione said softly as they began their walk to their respective suites. “I’ll see you in a little bit, James,” she said with a trembling hand on his shoulder, which she pulled away quickly.

“Take your time,” Harry said with a shrug and a soft smile. “I’m just going to unpack...”

The alarm on his bedside table startled Harry from the sleep he hadn’t realized he’d fallen into. With bleary eyes he looked around and sighed when he remembered where he was. Dressing in a pair of sweat pants and a sweatshirt, along with a pair of trainers, he slowly made his way to the Room of Requirement.

The winter had gotten pretty bad—or perhaps he just felt it was worse than what it actually was—whatever the case, Hermione had to continue her training inside where it was warmer. Harry modified her training regime due to her pregnancy and the two of them felt it would be best to train together.

Despite everything that had happened, Harry was rather relieved that Hermione hadn’t gone spare on him for his undercover mission and keeping her in the dark about Tonks and the baby. Though, with the memories of Ron’s machinations returning to her in full force, he could very well understand why she hadn’t broached the subject with him.

Harry found himself walking up and down the very familiar corridor as he had hundreds of times during his school years. Memories of Cho Chang’s kiss, Malfoy tripping him in the hall, teaching Occlumency to the D.A. members and many the night he found himself using the room for quiet study during his final year came to mind. He opened

the door when it appeared to find Hermione working on her morning stretches.

A sort of serene look had settled on her face and Harry realized she'd finally gotten those disturbing images out of her mind and gotten a good night's sleep.

"Morning," he said distantly as he went to his station and began stretching at a leisurely pace.

"Good morning," Hermione said with a slight edge to her voice. "Thank you for the pensieve, it helped so much..."

"You're welcome," Harry said with a slight smile. "Seeing you rested is a good thing."

"Without the dreams, I finally got a good night's sleep," she still hadn't looked up at him during the conversation and Harry knew it was time.

With a sigh of resignation, he conjured two soft chairs and took a seat in one. "Why don't we go ahead and talk then," Harry offered quietly. "I can tell you're ready..."

Hermione stopped stretching immediately and finally faced him. Her red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks were enough to tell him that she'd been thinking quite a bit about what had happened.

"How the *HELL* can you read me like that and not have seen what was going on?!" she asked forcefully. "If you know me so *damned* well, why didn't you just tell me about what happened between you two right away?! *YOU TOLD ME YOU WOULD WAIT!*" Her hands balled into fists that were so tight, her knuckles had gone white. The anger that was radiating off her was palpable and thick enough that Harry had difficulty breathing.

Harry nodded, knowing that it was time to get everything in the open.

"*DON'T NOD! SPEAK!*" Hermione bellowed angrily, tears streaking from her eyes.

"I was... afraid," Harry said with a sigh.

"Afraid?" she asked in disbelief. "What the hell were you afraid of?"

"I'd promised that I'd wait for you," Harry started, looking at his feet and swallowing nervously. "I just got you back in my life and I didn't want to lose you again. Tonks and I had been together for a while and I... I realized that you might never return my feelings... She and I loved each other so I chose her." He reached up and wiped away a few stray tears that had found their way to his cheeks. "I hadn't been happy for so long," he continued as she took the seat across from him. "She made me happy. We've leaned on each other for so long it was natural for me to fall for her..."

"We talked about everything just before the Hogsmeade trip," Harry admitted, "and I wasn't lying when I said I had to go deeper undercover... there was a threat of an attack in Hogsmeade and we had to be there as James and Marion..."

"So, you two were together that long?" Hermione asked evenly, but not angrily as she had before. "Is that when she got pregnant?"

"I don't know when she got pregnant, really," Harry said with a sigh. "She must have found out that day because she'd talked with Madam Pomfrey before we left..."

"I know it's inexcusable what we did to you," he continued. "I was afraid you'd look at it the same way that Ron had manipulated you and you'd leave again..."

"You had Tonks!" Hermione said quietly. "Why would you be afraid if I left again? We were only ever friends..."

"We were *best* friends," Harry said quietly. "But you were more to me than that... you have been for so long," he admitted. "I couldn't bear it if you threw that all away again... I know you didn't do it on purpose," he added when Hermione tried to protest. "But I didn't then... I knew something was *wrong* with you, but not what..."

"Harry..." Hermione said softly and he jumped when her hands took his. "I'm furious, yes, and you should have told me... you really should have." Harry nodded quietly and let her continue. "After the memory charms were removed, I realized that I'd been fighting his control for

years," she whispered. "My letters to you were the only way I could keep sane... we might not have seen each other during those years, but you were there, Harry," she said with a tight squeeze on his hands. "You've always been there... that's one of the reasons Ron did what he did... he felt he was still fighting against you... for me!" she said furiously and shook her head.

"I meant what I said at the Three Broomsticks, Harry," she whispered, "I'm not about to throw away our friendship, not willingly anyway. Thanks to you, I can finally look at everything that happened with a clear mind and work it all out."

"I'm glad," Harry said quietly and squeezed her hands in return. "I really am sorry I didn't tell you straight away... that I never replied to your letters nor spent enough time with you after you'd gotten away from Ron..."

"There's nothing we can do about it now," Hermione said with a sigh. "Thank you for the apology, it doesn't fix everything, but I believe you..." She slumped back in her chair and pinched the bridge of her nose while she absently rubbed her stomach, though she hadn't really started showing yet.

"So you've seen everything he did?" Harry asked after a moment, obviously exhausted from lack of sleep.

"Bits and pieces," she said quietly. "I spoke with mum about why she and dad only had me..."

"What did she say?"

"By time they were ready to settle down and had me she was told she had ovarian cancer..." Hermione said with a sigh. "She couldn't have any other children after me because of that... We almost lost her when I was three and I remember the visits to the hospital and crying for her. But she kept fighting and made it, obviously."

"I-I'm glad you had your m-mother," Harry stammered as a wave of sadness came over him.

"Oh, Harry, I'm sorry..."

“Don’t apologize,” Harry said quickly. “I’ll love Erin enough for the both of us,” he suddenly announced with a fiery passion. “A day won’t go by that she’s not happy and loved! I won’t let her go through what I did!”

“Erin?” Hermione asked startled.

Harry looked up in surprise. “Did I just say that aloud?” Hermione nodded. “Tonks told me her name...” he swallowed and took a deep breath to calm himself. “The name’s stuck in my head.”

“I think it’s a lovely name,” Hermione said softly. “And I’m sorry I yelled at you—”

“Stop apologizing,” Harry interrupted. “You have every right to be angry, you have every right to slug me with that same left hook you introduced Malfoy to... I’m not delicate china, Hermione...”

“I know, but with everything you’ve gone through...”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “Everything’s happened,” he said through a yawn. “And I can’t stop the world so I can feel sorry for myself... God knows I’m tired of everyone else feeling sorry for me!” He stood and began pacing. “I need to put this behind me! I can’t help anybody if I can’t get past my own self pity... I need to be there for Erin, when she comes, for you, and the students...”

“You can’t make everyone happy,” Hermione said, stopping him in mid stride with a hand on his shoulder. “You can’t help anyone if you can’t help yourself...”

“It won’t be easy, I know it won’t, but I have to... I can’t ignore what she’s been telling me each night!”

“It’s only been a month,” Hermione said softly. “You can’t bury it all like you did with Sirius,” she said sternly. “Remember how it tore you up? Don’t do that to yourself again...”

Harry sighed and nodded. “Maybe I should talk to Dr. Mudds,” he said resignedly.

“That’s a good first step,” Hermione said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll have him contact you after my session today, for now, we should get ready for class.”

Harry looked at his watch and nodded. Two hours had gone by like he hadn’t batted an eyelash. He looked up in surprise when Hermione hugged him with a bone-crushing hug like she’d given him when they were younger.

“I’m still angry, but I’ll get over it,” she whispered as he returned her hug. “I’m not going anywhere...”

“Thanks,” Harry said softly. “Thanks for everything these past few weeks...”

“She was my friend in both forms,” Hermione said with a sniffle. “I’m not going to let you go through this alone...”

Harry had to give credit to his students. Though he’d seen many of them glancing at him sympathetically from the tables his first night back in the castle, they seemed to have understood that he didn’t need that kind of attention. Class after class he was greeted with smiles and his seventh year students actually cheered at his return. Snape had been working them to the bone in a cruel manner, forcing homework and essays about Metamorphmagi down their throats from the day he’d taken over classes to the very last day he stood in for Harry.

He smiled at the potions master’s attempt to uncover Harry, but much to the ex-Death Eater’s chagrin, there wasn’t a student as clever as Hermione in the whole crop of them.

The day after starting classes, he went to his first grief counseling session with Dr. Mudds. He’d done marvelous work with orphans and the loved ones who were left behind during the war and with his wonderful bedside manner and compassion Harry was soon sleeping better each night.

His dreams were still filled with Tonks, her urgings for him to live and not waste his life mourning her, but they were becoming fewer and far between. Harry still cried himself to sleep the majority of the time, but

Hermione's growing stomach deflected his attention towards the prospect of fatherhood.

He still vowed that his daughter would be loved and that love shown each and every moment of every day and he surprised Hermione one night while she was visiting.

"What are you doing, Harry?" she whispered as he knelt before her and rubbed her swollen belly. Her eyes went wide and Harry pulled his hands off of her. "No, keep doing that!" she squealed excitedly. "I think the baby knows you're there!"

With a wide grin, Harry went back to gently rubbing her stomach and, quite surprisingly, the baby kicked.

"OHMYGOSH!" she said with a startled look on her face.

Harry laughed joyously as he felt another kick hit his hand. He looked up to see Hermione staring wide-eyed at her belly with tears beginning to slip down her cheeks. "Are you ok?" he asked concernedly, but smiled as the baby kicked again.

"I never thought I'd feel this," she said with a widening smile as her tears increased. "I never thought I'd have children..."

"You've proven her wrong, cutie," Harry said softly, his face pressed closely to her belly. He laughed as he imagined the baby's small foot connect with his cheek.

Hermione laughed at his expression but the laughter died away.

"Toora, loora, loora... Toora, loora, li... Toora, loora, loora... Hush now don't ye cry," Harry sang softly to her stomach. The look on his face caused Hermione to snifle and he looked up to her with a reassuring smile. He continued to sing softly until the baby stopped moving and with a smile, he rubbed her stomach once more before sitting back.

"Harry—"

“Sorry, I got a little carried away,” he said sheepishly. “I’d read that by now the baby can hear everything... I thought I’d try singing something.”

“That was beautiful,” she said with a sad smile and held her stomach protectively. “I-I need to get to bed...”

“We still on for tomorrow?” He asked as he helped her up.

“Luckily I can eat Madam Rosmerta’s stew,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“I’m sorry if I upset you with that—”

“You didn’t upset me,” she said with a reassuring smile. “It’s just beautiful; you’re going to be a wonderful father, Harry...”

“I hope so,” he said with a wan smile. “I’ve a lot to make up to her.”

“Don’t start that again,” Hermione said warningly. “You’ve more than enough love, and then some! Don’t spread yourself thin... Remember what you talked about with Dr. Mudds.”

Harry sighed and nodded then accepted a hug from Hermione.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said with a smile.

The days quickly turned into weeks, which then turned into months. Harry was smiling happily as Dennis Creevey and Natalie McDonald gave their speeches in front of the gathered students, friends and families. It was no surprise when the two teenagers had started dating two months before they finished school and Harry couldn’t help but beam proudly as the two top students in the school were given their just rewards.

There was a moment during the ceremonies that caught him off guard. Hermione had taken his hand as the Headmaster stepped onto the podium and cleared his throat.

“I’m happy that everyone was able to attend this year’s ceremonies,” he started. “Your sons and daughters have proven once again that

Hogwarts isn't made of stone and mortar, but the wonderful souls that have spent their time within its halls.

"This year, through the masterful planning of our head boy and head girl, Mr. Creevey and Miss McDonald, I'd like to make an announcement," the old wizard turned to Harry and smiled before returning his attention to the crowd. "Over the summer holiday, there will be an addition added to Hogwarts, one that we have been without for as long as the school has been standing. Taking our lead from the many Muggle universities, we here at Hogwarts will add a new gymnasium to the school grounds. Planning is underway and when your children resume their classes this coming fall, the Marion Baker Memorial Gymnasium will be open for all!"

Applause rose like a tidal wave crashing on an unsuspecting shore as Harry looked dumbly at his old professor. He felt Hermione's grip tighten on his hand and he turned to see her tear streaked face.

"Professor Baker, you and your wife were instrumental in saving so many this past Christmas Eve. The students all pitched in and devised the new addition in honor of your wife."

Hermione urged him to stand and stunned, he made his way to the podium where Dennis and Natalie were smiling at him.

"Sir, we all felt your loss when your wife died," Dennis said quietly, but the magically enhanced podium boomed his voice to everyone in attendance. "You've been such a wonderful professor and we just wanted to give you something in return."

"You've shown us the importance of physical fitness and you and your wife showed us again just how important it is to be ready to fight for those you love, even if they're strangers caught unawares in the street. We all hope you're ok with what we've done," Natalie said, a hopeful look on her face.

Harry was speechless. He looked out over the crowd and spotted the respect and hope in the other student's eyes, along with that of the adults who were present. With a nod, he took both Natalie's and Dennis' hands. "Thank you," he said hoarsely. Natalie sprang forward and hugged him tightly before stepping back to wipe her cheeks.

Harry turned towards the rest of those in attendance and said, "Thank you, everyone."

Every person in attendance clapped as Harry returned to his seat. Hermione set a hand on his arm as he fought to control his emotions.

"How long have you known?" he asked in a choked whisper as students' names were read off to receive their wizarding licenses.

"Since the day they returned to school," Hermione whispered back. "I'm sorry it's not her real name—"

"I'd gotten to know her as both," Harry said quickly, not trusting his voice. "Whatever her name, she was still Tonks..."

The day went by rather quickly from there. Students boarded the Hogwarts Express, some for their final trip, and headed home for the summer holidays.

Harry was itching to get back to the Burrow, the first time he'd ever gone straight to the Weasley household after school let out, and it seemed his packing wasn't going fast enough.

Hermione joined him later that evening, waddling around the room even though he'd told her to sit down and not fret over anything, but she'd refused to be idle while Harry rushed about her haphazardly throwing things into his trunk.

The first night back was a welcome relief and the remaining Weasleys, plus three, sat at the kitchen table for tea.

"How're things at the Ministry?" Harry asked Mr. Weasley after a bite of roast.

"It's the same red tape everywhere," Mr. Weasley replied with disgust. "Even though I'm Minister, there're still hundreds of forms that have to be—"

Ginny smiled brightly after clearing her throat.

“What is it, pump... err... Ginny?” Mr. Weasley asked curiously, trying to cover his use of his daughter's nickname.

Everyone turned to look at the glowing woman and she made a point to brush the hair out of her face to reveal a stunning engagement ring.

“OH GINNY!” Mrs. Weasley said in a sudden burst of joyous laughter before engulfing her daughter in a tight hug then pulling Neville Longbottom into the suffocating embrace. “When did he ask?!”

“Ginny, I’m so happy for you!” Hermione squealed and took her unofficial sister in her arms. “Congratulations!”

“When’s the date?! When are you going to start planning?! Have you picked out robes? Nonsense, you’ll wear mine!” Mrs. Weasley said in rapid, excited succession much to Ginny’s irritation.

Harry smiled brightly at the couple and offered his congratulations as well. His hand went to a lump beneath his jumper and his smile faltered a bit, but he didn’t let that diminish the happiness that Neville and Ginny were currently sharing.

“Well, Neville, tell them about your new job, Love,” Ginny said with a nervous smile.

Neville blushed, still not used to attention and turned to everyone. “I’ll be working in Australia for the Sydney Oceanic Institute for Magical Marine Life,” he announced with a wide smile. “They just opened an aquatic plant life branch and want me to head the department!”

Everyone cheered happily at the news with Neville receiving hugs and claps on the back from those present.

“But we want to get married before he leaves,” Ginny added. “Which will be in three months...”

“We have a lot of planning to do!” Molly said in surprise. “Where are we going to have it? The invitations! Bridesmaids! Oh, lord, there’s so much to do!”

“Mum! To answer your questions,” Ginny said with a roll of her eyes. “Here, our family and closest friends, Hermione and Harry, if they’ll stand by us...”

“I’d love to, Ginny!” Hermione said with a sob and hugged the younger girl awkwardly. “Oh, this hugging business gets harder and harder,” she said exasperatedly.

“You can count on me, Neville,” Harry said with a warm smile. “Thank you for thinking of me...”

“You’re the closest friend I have, Harry,” Neville smiled in return. “Thanks for accepting...”

“We’d like to have the wedding a few weeks before Neville and I have to report into work—” Ginny started.

“You and Neville starting work?” Mr. Weasley asked in surprise.

“Ginny’s been accepted as a magical creatures researcher,” Neville said, beaming with pride.

Mrs. Weasley didn’t look like she could handle all this good news at once. She seemed to be on ‘proud-parent-overload’ and instead shook her head and smiled widely at her daughter. “My little baby...” she whimpered before hugging Ginny tightly again to everyone’s laughter.

There wasn’t a day that went by where wedding plans weren’t being discussed in the kitchen and Harry would be sent on an errand for this item or that bauble. To be honest, he was happy to be so busy. By the time the evening rolled around, Harry had his hands full with reading children’s books or singing lullabies to Hermione’s growing stomach. The same night that Ginny and Neville announced their engagement and subsequent jobs, Hermione also announced she’d be moving into the house as well.

Harry was surprised at first, but Hermione smiled and laughed. “When you’re not around, the baby throws fits! I can’t sleep when she’s kicking like mad... she needs her dad to sing her to sleep!”

Harry didn't argue the point and welcomed the chance to bond with his unborn daughter. The time spent with Hermione was wonderful as well and they'd quickly repaired their friendship with such close contact over the course of just a few months.

The last day in July, he woke to the sound of several voices, most of which were trying to be quiet and curiosity got the best of him.

"Fred! Be quiet! George, put that over there!" Hermione's hushed voice wafted up the stairs. "If you wake him up, Bill, I know a few curses that the goblins haven't even heard of!"

Harry chuckled to himself when he heard the last comment and slipped back into his room. *What are they doing?* he asked himself as he gathered his clothes for the day. Tonks' picture caught his attention and he smiled at the photo. "It's my birthday today, Love... Erin should be here soon..."

He walked down the hall to the bathroom where he showered and changed for the day. When he headed downstairs, he was greeted with silence.

"Hermione?" he called into the house, only to be answered with silence. Smiling, he walked into the kitchen.

"SURPRISE!" everyone shouted as he appeared in the doorway.

Harry jumped but smiled and took in the faces of Ginny, Neville, Fred, George, Arthur, Molly, and Bill. Their significant others were there as well and the startled birthday boy let out a laugh.

"You should have seen the look on your face, Harry!" George laughed heartily.

"He'll get the chance!" Fred said as he held up a camera.

"Happy birthday, Harry," Ginny said with a hug, followed by handshakes from the men and another hug from Mrs. Weasley.

"Thanks," Harry said with an even wider smile. The only time he'd had a surprise party was one that Tonks had thrown him two years

ago. He looked around in an attempt to find Hermione and smiled when he saw her sitting on the other side of the table.

“Happy birthday, Harry,” Hermione said with a wide smile on her face. Harry bent and gave her a fierce hug.

“You planned this, didn’t you?” he asked with a laugh.

“Guilty as charged,” she replied with a grin.

“Let’s get you into these gifts then!” Arthur said with an excited look that he only reserved for his children on special days such as this.

They led Harry to the head of the table where everyone set a gift in front of him. Eagerly, he began ripping open the packages, smiling at each gift in turn.

Hermione had gotten into a standing position by then and waddled to him with her gift. “I hope you like it,” she said with a smile. “It wasn’t easy to find everything I needed.”

Harry grinned at her and unwrapped the package only to stop as soon as the portrait’s occupant peeked from behind the paper.

“Wha?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Wotcher, Harry?” Tonks’ portrait asked with a wide smile. “Sorry I’m not there in person...”

“Tonks?” Harry said hoarsely as she nodded with a smile. He looked to Hermione who was smiling hopefully, tears beading over her long lashes. He looked back to the portrait and smiled. “I haven’t heard your voice in so long,” he said in a whisper.

“I know,” she said with a wan smile. “Enjoy your day, Love, we can talk later...” Tonks’ portrait smiled lovingly and disappeared from the frame.

Harry looked back to Hermione, his watery eyes speaking volumes to her. She was smiling, but crying freely by this time. Hermione bent and hugged him tightly.

“Happy birthday, Harr-OOOH!” she said and doubled over.

“Hermione, is everything ok?” Harry asked with concern. He looked down at the puddle of fluid that was spreading from her feet.

“It’s time,” she whispered hoarsely as another contraction hit her. “The baby’s coming!”

“Mrs. Weasley, can you bring her bag?!” Harry asked quickly and Molly handed him Hermione’s overnight bag with a wide smile.

“Don’t just stand there like a daft idiot!” she barked. “Get her to St. Mungo’s!”

Harry nodded dumbly and after grabbing the bag and Hermione, they apparated to the wizarding hospital. Unlike Muggle hospitals, he wasn’t allowed in the operating room during birth, but he could wait in her room.

Four hours after they arrived, the door to Hermione’s private room opened and an exhausted Hermione was wheeled in on a mobile bed.

“Is she ok? Is the baby ok?” Harry asked the nurse who was following alongside the bed.

“They’re both fine,” she said with a wide smile. “We’ll bring your daughter by after she’s cleaned up and checked over.”

Harry stood in stunned silence for a moment at the proclamation that he had a daughter. He snapped to and looked to Hermione. Her hair was slick with sweat and disheveled, her eyes were half open, and Harry had a difficult time telling if she were smiling or grimacing.

“Hey,” he said softly, pulling a chair close to the bed and brushing her hair from her forehead.

“Hey,” she said in a quiet voice.

“How’re you feeling?”

"Like I passed a St. Bernard out my arse," she said with a soft chuckle. Harry smiled and dried her forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. "Are they going to bring her in? I haven't seen her yet," Hermione asked groggily.

"They will," Harry whispered.

"Mr. Potter," the nurse said with a bright smile. "Congratulations on your baby daughter." She passed a small, pink wrapped bundle to Harry.

He took the baby in his arms and gently moved the blanket so he could see her entire face. "Hello, I'm your daddy," he said in a choked sob. Harry gently kissed her forehead and smiled lovingly as she yawned sleepily.

Harry looked up and saw something in Hermione's face that made his heart go out to her. A few steps brought him to the bed and with a tender smile, set the tiny bundle in Hermione's arms.

"She's so beautiful," Hermione sobbed as she smoothed away a tuft of dark hair that clung to the top of the baby's head. "Oh, Harry, you're so lucky..."

"We're lucky," Harry whispered in her ear. "All three of us..." he looked to his daughter and smiled happily. "Thank you so much, Hermione," he whispered to her and kissed his best friend's forehead. "You're absolutely beautiful..."

"Harry?" she asked in a startled whisper.

"I saw that look on your face," he said and smiled when she winced. "Did you really think I'd keep you two apart?"

"I'm not her mum," she said sadly.

Harry shook his head and held his baby's hand. "You're as much her mum as I am her dad," he said with a caring smile. "Erin, say hello to your mum..."

Hermione let out a sob and hugged Harry with all of her strength, to which he laughed. "Thank you, Harry," she sobbed as he stroked her hair. "I couldn't bear it if I couldn't see her..."

"You're daft if you think I'd do that to you," he said with a smile and pulled back a little. On impulse, he gently tipped her face to his and kissed her tenderly.

Hermione's eyes went wide but as he pulled back, a shy smile spread across her lips. Her eyes drooped heavily and Harry could see she was fading fast. As gently as he could, he took Erin from her arms. "Rest, mum," he said with a laugh as Hermione's smile widened, even as her eyes sealed themselves. Harry turned Erin towards Hermione and waved her tiny arm. "We'll be here when you wake up, won't we, Sweets?" Erin's tiny yawn was her reply and Harry kissed his daughter's head as he sat down to wait for Hermione to wake up.

The onslaught of memories subsided and Erin found herself staring into her father's tear-filled eyes. She glanced around in confusion for a moment before locking eyes with Hermione.

Chapter Seventeen

Repercussions

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you," Hermione whimpered as she wrung a cloth in her hands. "I'm so sorry you didn't get to meet your real mum..." she sobbed.

Erin felt her throat constrict as a grief she'd never felt clutched at her. Tears filled her eyes instantly as she looked back towards her father. "Couldn't you have just *told* me?" she asked with a mournful groan and covered her face with her hands. She felt a soft hand on her shoulder and looked up to her mother's grief stricken face.

"Can you forgive me, Erin?" she asked in a stutter.

"Forgive you?" Erin asked in confusion.

Hermione cringed and nodded in defeat. "I-I understand..." she said sadly and pulled her hand from Erin's shoulder.

Erin, however, would have none of it. She immediately hugged Hermione to her as tightly as she could. "Why do I need to forgive you, Mum?" she asked through a sob, causing Hermione to cry even harder.

"If it weren't for me, your real mum would be here right now..." Hermione wailed miserably.

"You *ARE* my real mum!" Erin cried in return. She remembered herself and within the span of a heartbeat, pulled Harry into her hug as well. "I'm so sorry, Daddy, I didn't know..."

"Shh, it's ok, Sweets," Harry said hoarsely. "You needed to know, from us, not the Ministry..."

"What does the Ministry have to do with me?" Erin asked in return, still reeling and confused from her father's unique explanation of events.

"When you turn eighteen," Hermione said with a sigh, "you inherit the Tonks estate. You're the only heir."

“What?” Erin asked in bewilderment.

“Before she died, your mum, Tonks, willed everything to you, Sweets,” Harry said with a soft smile, though his face looked extraordinarily pained. Erin couldn’t help her tears when she saw the pain and grief on his face. “It’s about twice as much now than what I inherited from my parents.”

“But I don’t need money,” Erin said sadly, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “I-I didn’t expect this,” she admitted after a moment.

“If you need time, Honey, we understand,” Hermione said with a slight smile then hugged her tightly once more. “It was hard when we went through it all the first time, I can only imagine what it was like to relive it.”

“It brought back a lot of old memories and feelings,” Harry said hoarsely. Hermione released Erin to hug Harry to her and Harry brought his eldest daughter into a group hug once again. “I love you so much, both of you,” he whispered as Hermione kissed him on the cheek. “Tonks gave us so much... none of us would be here without her...”

“Daddy, I’m so, so sorry... I could barely handle what you felt when she... she left...” Erin whispered. “I’ve got so many questions running through my head now and I just don’t know where to start!”

“Take your time, Erin,” Hermione said after a kiss to her forehead. “There’s plenty of time and what we can’t answer, Tonks can...”

“What?!” Erin asked with a start.

“I still have her portrait,” Harry said with a soft smile. “Your mum and I talk to her every day.”

Erin looked between the two, confused by Hermione’s soft smile and agreeable nod at Harry’s explanation. “But you were terribly in love with her... doesn’t it tear you apart to still see her?”

Harry smiled softly and a look crossed his face that Erin had only seen when he looked at her mother. He looked to her and that smile

widened. "It did at first but I had to put her portrait into storage so I could concentrate on the two of you and move past my grief," he admitted, "but a few years later, your mum thought it was time to bring her back out." He shook his head before Erin could say a word. "I visited her grave every day, and I still do."

"So do I," Hermione said with a smile. "She and I were friends long before your dad and she got together, and, well, you saw what happened. Without her, you wouldn't have been born or any of your brothers or sisters. In a way, she's in each and every one of you, especially you."

"So she's where my eye color came from," Erin said after a moment.

"And, it seems, your clumsiness as well," Harry said with a slight grin. "You look so much like her it's uncanny, except for the hair; that comes from my mum."

Erin nodded quietly. "Do you mind if I go for a walk in the garden? I need to work this out. Alone... if that's ok?"

"Of course, Honey," Hermione said with another hug. "Whenever you're ready we can answer any questions you have."

Erin hugged her father once again and in a slight daze, walked straight through the kitchen and into the family garden. *I wish I knew how he knows what I'm thinking!* she grumbled to herself.

As soon as her foot hit the cobblestone path from the back porch, she gasped in recognition. The very same garden that Tonks had started planting in Hogsmeade was staring back at her in all its glory. The rosebushes had grown tremendously over the years and the other flowers had blossomed beautifully. The gardenias, mimosas, every single flower Tonks had planted thrived as if there were no tomorrow.

Hesitantly, Erin walked to her favorite rosebush and plucked one of the flowers from its branch. She inhaled deeply, taking the fragrant sent in through her nose, and smiled at the blossom's sweet, familiar smell. The sent triggered one of her father's memories and tears welled in her eyes as she saw him slip a rose of the very same color behind Tonks' ear.

With a miserable sigh, Erin trudged up the path to a secluded gazebo and sat on one of the pine-slat benches that lined the surrounding railing. The memories played in her head at a dizzying pace while her mind attempted to sort through everything. Erin pressed her palms into her eyes but the sheer amount of information made it difficult to quell the throbbing headache that so often followed a Legilimency experience.

“Why didn’t he just *tell* me?” she grumbled irritably as she rested her elbows on her knees, leaned forward and held her face in her hands.

After a time, the images ordered themselves and Erin could easily sort through events as they happened. She’d heard about Ron Weasley here and there, but never in great detail. His name usually brought about a sullen response from anyone she knew and now she finally understood why. Her eyes filled with tears again as the fateful day her mother died rolled across her mind’s eye, swiftly followed by the subsequent news of what he’d done to all those other women.

She watched Tonks traipse through her thoughts at every turn and wondered what it would have been like had she not died. Would she have been as loving as her mum? Would she have kept her dad happy? Erin had always thought her Metamorphmagus abilities came from Harry, but it was plain to see that her mother had a hand in that as well.

What happened to Ron? she asked herself as the lost Weasley in question flashed in her mind, causing her to shiver involuntarily. When she tried to recall his trial, she drew a blank. Did her father neglect to tell her because he didn’t think it important? Was it too horrific to witness again? Just as quickly as those questions flashed to the forefront of her thoughts, they faded away.

What about Hermione, her mum? Was she being controlled all those years? What did Ron do to her? Why didn’t she get help? What happened in the war when her dad was fighting?

Erin growled to herself and kicked at a giggling garden gnome. The spud-headed beast cackled in glee before running out into the garden again, apparently looking for an old boot to crawl into. “Irritating turnip

with legs!" she grumbled as it cackled somewhere in the surrounding shrubberies.

"Hey," Hermione said quietly. Erin jumped at her mother's sudden appearance. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, Honey."

"It's ok, Mum," Erin said with a sigh.

"I brought your favorite," Hermione said as quietly as before. "It's been a few hours and I thought you might be hungry."

"Thanks, Mum," she replied with a sigh, still sorting through each memory in an attempt to analyze each one in turn.

"We're just in the house whenever you're ready," Hermione said with a reassuring smile as she set the plate of baklava on the seat next to her daughter. Erin nodded and looked up just as Hermione turned to leave.

"Mum?"

"Yes," Hermione asked, turning around slowly.

"Could you... stay?" Erin asked hopefully.

"Of course," her mother said with a relieved smile. "Did you want to talk?"

Erin nodded as Hermione sat across from her and helped herself to a piece of Erin's favorite dessert.

"What-what happened to Ron?" she asked hesitantly. "I mean, Dad didn't show me the trial and nobody talks about him and I only knew him from your earlier photos."

Hermione closed her eyes and nodded. "Well, he lasted a while in Azkaban, until a few years ago. Your dad and I saw him for the last time in March, on his birthday actually..."

Hermione stopped at the massive iron gates of the wizarding prison. Harry had been there on countless occasions during the war and

afterwards while delivering Death Eaters for their final punishment. She'd never thought that she'd ever step foot in the realm of the Dementors.

Harry supported her with a strong arm around her shoulders and smiled softly at her. "We can leave if you'd like, Love," he said with a comforting squeeze of her shoulders.

"No, I need to do this, Harry," Hermione said with a sigh. "I'm just going to keep dreaming about him breaking out of here and coming after us..."

Harry nodded silently and waited for her to make the first move. Hermione looked to the foreboding castle ahead of them and involuntarily shivered. Though it was well below freezing beyond the wards, the sheer magnitude of the obsidian fortress with its tall, black spires was enough to give anyone pause. She could imagine what this well of dark magic must have been like during the peak of whatever civilization built it and didn't need the deathly cold temperatures behind them to shudder once again.

Of course, she'd read about Azkaban, the ancient fortress from a long forgotten time in human history, though it would be more precisely termed wizarding history. Whoever built the castle wanted its mere visage to cast an imposing shadow on all who witnessed the sleek, glossy, ebon towers. Each and every inch was constructed from the blackest, most pure obsidian that could be found. Deposits of the rare stone must have been in abundance during whatever epoch spawned the vile populace that once lived here.

Theories suggested that Dementors were the long removed ancestors of the black tower's previous inhabitants. Doomed souls who needed to feed on the life force of others to remain in the material realm. Others believed the dark creatures were actually materialized ghosts, specters of those who actually lived on these grounds. Yet others postulated that Dementors were merely wizards who had risen like vampires after receiving that most dreaded kiss.

The literature was out there, but most of it was speculation. Hermione held little hope that she'd find any more information unless some treasure trove still lingered beneath the unfeeling walls of Azkaban

and she hoped that she'd never have to lay eyes upon its countenance again.

With a determined glint in her eyes, she took her husband's hand and stepped through the gaping maw of iron that kept the wizarding prison's inmates firmly trapped within its grounds. Almost immediately, the joy in her life slipped away, hearkening back to a time where she'd first experienced the chill presence of Azkaban's dark wardens.

Flashes of a young Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley jumped into her mind as that fateful train ride in third year resurfaced in her thoughts. She gripped her wand tightly and squeezed Harry's hand as tightly as she could, comforted by his presence and protection.

The feeling faded away after the two entered the visitor's section and a tired Remus Lupin smiled brightly at the two of them.

"Remus!" Harry said with a wide smile, happy to see their old family friend, despite the circumstances.

"Oh, it's been ages!" Hermione said happily as she wrapped the aged werewolf in a tight hug. "How are the treatments holding up?"

"It's good to see the both of you," Remus said with a laugh. "I've been lycanthrope free for six months now," he said with a glint of glee in his eyes. "You started the Ministry in the right direction, Hermione, and for the life of me I still don't know how you happened upon your theory!"

"We'll have to talk about it later," Arthur Weasley said from the door. "Molly isn't coming."

Harry nodded and looked to his wife, the smile had fallen from Hermione's face at the realization that their visit was commencing.

"How much longer?" she asked with a trembling voice as Mr. Weasley enveloped her in a fatherly embrace, followed by a similar hug to Harry who returned it without hesitation.

"A few hours at the most," he replied sadly. "I wish it'd never come to this..."

"We all do, Dad," Harry said comfortingly. "I still miss him, the old Ron anyway."

"As you said, Harry," Ginny chimed in as she and her husband, Neville Longbottom, stepped in from the courtyard, "we all do."

"Ginny!" Hermione nearly squealed and wrapped the younger woman in a tight hug. "How are the children?"

"They're looking forward to spending the summer with you," Ginny returned with a smile.

"Everyone's here," Arthur said after hugging his daughter and son-in-law. Neville had been quiet the entire time, smiling his greeting to the others and hugging or shaking hands where appropriate.

"It's good to see you, mate," he said to Harry after everyone started down the hall. "I never thought I'd be here..."

"The first time is the worst," Harry said quietly while Hermione clutched his hand almost painfully. "But I've never had to visit anyone here before."

Neville simply nodded and wrapped his arm around Ginny's shivering shoulders. The trip didn't take them long, surprisingly, and before anyone could take stock of their surroundings, Arthur stopped and turned towards a heavy, iron door. From a hidden pocket within his robes, Mr. Weasley produced an equally heavy key and inserted it into the door's lock. It turned with a miasma of clinking, clunking, and the sickening screech of rusted metal before the door finally swung silently open.

Hermione gasped at the sight of the man who was lying in the bed before them. His once fiery red hair was streaked with grey, the skin on his face no longer taut but as baggy as Dudley's castoffs were on Harry, and his body was so thin, his bones seemed to protrude from his flesh. Ronald Weasley seemed a man twenty times his actual age and nothing like the best friend she and her husband once loved as a brother, and in Hermione's case a lover.

A short, ragged breath escaped his parched lips as he turned his sunken eyes upon the group at the door to his personal hell. A loneliness that Hermione could not fathom was mirrored in his dull eyes and she nearly burst into tears at the sight.

“What’s HE doing here?” Ron wheezed in a quiet rage that had all but consumed him since his incarceration so many years ago.

“We’ve come to see you off,” Mr. Weasley said quietly as he stepped closer to his ailing son. “After all this time, do you think—”

“Here to gloat Potter?” Ron spat before balling into a coughing fit. “Happy to see me in your shadow once again?”

“No, Ron,” Harry said quietly as he looked upon his once best friend.

Ron continued to glare at him unflinchingly, challenging Harry to continue to deny his allegations.

“You’ve caused more pain than any single person I can name, save Voldemort,” Ron still flinched at the name of the long exhumed Dark Lord and Harry shook his head as he continued. “I’ve asked myself why you turned out the way you did, and time after time I’ve come to one conclusion: if you hadn’t gone with me to the Department of Mysteries, all of this could have been stopped, but you were such a good friend that you went anyway... even when I told you to stay back. I know you won’t, but I hope that you can forgive me for dragging you along on that night.”

Everyone looked at Harry in stunned silence. Hermione’s stifled sob was the only sound that anyone made until Ron’s hoarse laughter filled the room. Her anguish swiftly turned to anger and the insecurities she’d felt outside washed away in her righteous rage.

“Don’t you even dare think you’re better than him you worthless piece of Skrewt shit!” she bellowed angrily at the now startled Ron. “For years he’s lived in conditions WORSE than this! You have no FUCKING right to look down on Harry!” In her rage, she’d stepped forward, involuntarily shuddering at the leering look he gave her. With an animalistic growl, Hermione curled her hand into a fist and deftly slugged the man she once thought of as her lover squarely in the jaw.

The impact of her punch immediately caused swelling and bruising on his face and he wasn't ready for the second or third blows either. Harry pulled her away from their ex-best friend and held her in a tight hug as she broke down in tears.

Ron stared at her in disbelief in obvious shock that his pet had attacked him so viciously. A dislocated jaw kept him from speaking in more than a mumble and he was too weak to do anything but lie in what the prison thought was a bed.

Harry asked her if she wanted to leave and Hermione gave her answer with a near-imperceptible nod. He turned and looked sadly at Ronald Weasley for the last time. "I forgive you, Ron," he said in a low voice. "I can only hope that wherever you end up after this, you realize what you've done and I can only hope you can forgive me."

With nothing more to say, the two of them quit Ron's cell and hurried from the prison's oppressive atmosphere. Hermione didn't look back, she didn't say another word until they were safely to the apparition point and finally safe at home.

"He died three hours later, still hating Harry and completely alone," Hermione whispered, wiping the tears from her eyes. "After what happened, the others left and didn't look back."

Erin hugged her mother tightly, which Hermione returned with a grateful sigh. "I'm so sorry, Mum," she whispered through her own tears. "I can't believe that Dad forgave him after everything he'd done..."

"Oh, Honey," Hermione said with a sob, "that's what makes your father so special! He doesn't know what hate is, not even for Voldemort or Wormtail! There's no room in his heart for anything but love, and even to this day, he regrets that trip to the Ministry."

"But Ron was worse than either of those two," Erin protested. "I hate him now and I've never met him!"

"There's nothing to be gained with hate, Sweets," Harry said tenderly from the path. "Ron did terrible things, but deep inside he was still the same best friend I remember." He stepped into the gazebo and sat

between his wife and daughter, setting a hand on each of their knees. "He was the second friend I ever had, followed closely by your mum, and after everything we'd shared, no matter how angry I was with him, I still loved him as a brother."

Hermione took his hand in hers, squeezed it lovingly and he smiled at her in return.

"I got closure for what he did to me that day," Hermione said with a sad smile. "I'd never known an anger so consuming until he scoffed at your father's attempt at reconciliation."

Erin took Harry's hand as well and nodded somberly. "I guess I feel more pity than I do hate," she admitted softly. "It's hard to believe that he went from being a loyal friend to someone who hated you so much."

"I don't think he really hated me," Harry said after a moment of thought. "I think that deep down—somewhere at the center of his heart—Ron forgave me for putting him through what turned him into what you saw. I like to remember how he used to be when we'd play Quidditch at the Burrow or when we played chess while your mum read... it makes things easier to live with and reminds me that he wasn't always the way he was."

Erin nodded quietly as she absorbed what her father had to say on the matter. "What happened at the trial? I don't remember seeing anything."

"I kept that out," Harry said with a serious look in his eyes. "He was worse when he wasn't weak from malnourishment and the things he'd shouted at the Wizengamot—let me just say that I'm glad your mum wasn't there to witness them."

"They showed up in the Daily Prophet though," Hermione said dryly. "'Third Wheel of the Dream Team Sentenced to Azkaban'... I was so thrilled that Skeeter lost control of her Animagus transformation! I don't think anybody's heard from her since that article."

"There was a warning on that QuickQuotes Quill she was using," Harry said as he shook his head in silent amusement. "The ink was

addictive and eventually shorted her ability to transform back into a human.”

“Is that the same one who wrote all those nasty articles about you during the Tri-Wizard Tournament?” Erin asked with a slight smile at Harry’s nod. “If my Animagus form was a beetle, I’d probably do my best to literally be underfoot and end my misery!”

Harry and Hermione laughed with their daughter, all three of them enjoying being a family once again. Erin looked to her parents and began tugging at her lip, a nervous twitch she’d picked up from Hermione, as she thought about the next question.

“What happened to all that money Ron won?” she asked after a few moments.

“Seeing as he had no heir, it was passed to his family,” Harry said with a shrug.

“Papa and Gramma didn’t like how he’d gotten it and they split it equally among all the girls he’d attacked,” Hermione continued. “By this time, they had more than enough money and they gave a second share to Mr. Lovegood and Padma Patil. The families didn’t want it at first, but Papa insisted they take it.”

“I assume you turned it down?” Erin asked knowingly, smirking at the slight nod that Hermione gave in reply.

“We had more than enough money, what with the Potter and Black estates,” she explained, “so I had Papa give my share to support the freeing of House-Elves.”

“And here I thought she’d given up on S.P.E.W. long ago!” Harry said with a laugh, “But never underestimate your mum, we’ve had free Elves for the past three years because of her.” Hermione blushed, but a wide smile spread across her face.

“Dobby seems happy enough,” Erin said with a smile. “Are he and Winky stopping by this July?”

"I think so," Harry said with a smile. "Winky still wants to show off Knob, she's almost as bad as your mum was with you!"

"Erin was a beautiful baby!" Hermione returned with a laugh and a playful slap to Harry's knee. Erin smiled lovingly at her parents. How they'd gotten through what they did and still found each other was beyond her.

"Were you always in love with Dad?" Erin asked for what seemed to be the billionth time since she'd started talking and Hermione smiled wanly.

"Well, I was daft at first, but I was still trying to reach out to him," Hermione said with a sigh. "I guess I went with Ron because nobody else wanted me—"

"That you were aware of," Harry interrupted. "The truth is, Sweets, we've loved each other since we were eleven. We never stopped and when the time was right, we took the next step from friends to lovers."

"I was surprised when he kissed me after you were born!" Hermione said with a laugh. "I was too tired to respond properly and when I woke up, I knew it was time... I knew he was really the one. All I needed to see was the two of you asleep in the chair next to my bed."

"It took me a while longer," Harry said with a smile. "I was still dealing with Tonks' passing, but she'd given me her blessing so many times, I can't even remember when I'd moved on."

"What was she like?" Erin asked curiously. "I saw her when she was with you, Dad, but there were a lot of gaps."

"She was one of the happiest people I knew," Harry said with loving smile. "When we first met, she had an energy about her that kept us all in stitches. She'd gotten injured during the fight at the Ministry but pulled through that without any scars. She began to lose her spark after her mother died and then fell into a deep depression after her father died."

"She was the last in her family at that point and we'd been such good friends for so long that we ended up supporting each other," Harry's

smile waned a bit as he worked things through in his mind. "She hated her first name, and I don't know how I survived when I proposed to her, and that was just one of her quirks. Pink hair, tattoos, you name it, she was a rebel and then some. She really knew how to throw a party and I remember this one time where an overzealous prank turned everyone's hair blue for a week!" He laughed at the obvious mental image that caused, pulling smiles from Hermione and Erin as well. "But aside from all that, she ranks up there with your mum and grandmum when it comes to loving someone with everything she had," Harry explained with that same look on his face.

"When mum had me, you ended everything. Didn't, um, didn't my *other* mum cross your mind at all?" Erin asked nervously.

Harry flinched but nodded. "Oh, yes, she did," he said softly. "Your mum was asleep and you were too young to remember, but I really missed her right then. Don't get me wrong, I love your mum very, very much, but I couldn't help thinking what would have happened if Tonks had lived. I still wonder sometimes, but I can't compare your mum to her, it's like comparing apples and oranges." He smiled at his analogy and shook his head. "It was a few months later that I started to move on. In my dreams, Tonks kept pushing me to live my life and not let her hold me back," he said with a slight chuckle. Hermione kissed his cheek lovingly and patted his hand comfortingly while Erin sifted through more of her questions.

"What happened to her ashes? I've never seen her Urn around the house." she asked after a few moments.

"What do you think keeps our garden looking so beautiful?" Hermione asked with a smile. "When we moved into the house, we replanted the garden and spread her ashes over the entire thing..."

"She was proud of what she did out here," Harry said with an expansive wave of his hand. "Everything she planted was done out of love and I thought it would be best to let her continue to keep the garden growing. It was a shock to find the flowers blossoming and the entire place free of snow the winter after the Ash Spreading Ceremony."

“We held it on her birthday—you were just over a year at the time—and everyone was here,” Hermione said with a soft smile. “I can still remember Gramma squeezing your father to death in one of her hugs,” she said with a laugh, “and it’s good to see that she’s not changed a bit from when I first met her. But Tonks’ urn is still here... your father keeps it in his den. Haven’t you wondered why there were lilies in the violently pink vase?”

Erin smiled in recognition. “I’d always thought it was a bit too girlish for Dad’s office, let alone the pink walls on either side of his desk,” Erin chuckled slightly. “Now I know. Dad, you said that you and Mum visited her grave every day?” Erin asked quizzically. “Did you mean the garden?”

Harry shook his head and smiled. “No, I meant her grave. It’s not far from here, actually. If you turn right at the path by the big hill, you’d find another one that went to the graveyard she was cremated in. You’ve been there a few times, but it was before you were old enough to talk. Your mum and I jog there and back every morning and I still keep the greenhouse charm going, it needs to be recast every thirty days.”

“To keep her warm,” Erin said softly. “Do-do you love her more than mum?” she asked suddenly, biting her lower lip after the words left her mouth.

Instead of the shock she expected from her parents, they both smiled softly at one another. “Erin, I loved her with all my heart,” Harry said gently. “When she passed on, it was devastating... I struggled but with your mum’s support, I was able to move on. When you were born and I saw how your mum reacted to you... I knew everything would truly be ok.” He thought for a moment before continuing. “Did I love Tonks more than Hermione?” he asked rhetorically and shook his head. “I love them both with all my heart but in different ways. Nobody will ever take her place just as nobody will ever take Hermione’s place. The same can be said for you, Colin, Eileen, Andrew, and Catherine.

“That was one of my problems back then,” he explained with a wistful smile. “I loved your mum first, but Tonks was the one who returned

my feelings... it was a confusing time and I can't say that I regret any minute that I've spent with her, nor do I regret any minute that I've spent with your mum. Can you see what I'm saying?"

"How can you love so many people so much with what you've lived through, Dad?" Erin asked as tears came to her eyes uncontrollably.

He smiled and gathered her in his arms. "There's never too much love to give, Sweets," he explained as Hermione laid a comforting hand on Erin's shoulder.

"See what I mean about your father?" Hermione asked with a loving smile. "After everything he's gone through, he's always given of himself freely... he's even forgiven people that don't deserve it..."

Harry shrugged as they pulled apart. "He might not have deserved it, but I needed to let go and remember him as he was..."

"Harry, you can't keep all that guilt built up inside—"

"I know, Love," Harry said softly. "But I had a hand in things—"

"ERIN!" a girl squealed with high-pitched enthusiasm from the path.

"LEENIE!" Erin squealed in return as her younger sister rushed into the gazebo and nearly crushed her in a vice-like hug.

"When did you get home?! How was Australia?! Are Aunt Ginny and Uncle Neville coming tomorrow?!" Eileen asked excitedly.

Erin laughed, though she was slightly irritated that her conversation with her parents had been interrupted.

"I've been home for a few hours, it was wonderful and all of them are coming," she replied as more hurried footsteps echoed down the path.

"ERIN!" Catherine squeaked in surprise and ran to her older sister. Colin and Andrew rounded the hedge as well and the three of them rushed her with outstretched arms.

"I missed you, Sis," Colin said with the Potter trademark grin. "How's Justin?"

Catherine and Eileen both looked to Erin with star-struck eyes, waiting impatiently for any word on their big sister's romantic boyfriend.

"He was a total creep," Erin said with a wide smile as Andrew hugged her tightly.

"I'm sorry, Sissy," Andrew said with a sad look. "You seemed really happy with him."

"He's not important anymore," Erin said as she looked to her parents then her brothers and sisters. "Not important at all..."

Chapter Eighteen

Birthday Surprises

"Erin, wake up."

Erin turned over on her side and buried her head under her pillow. "Too tired," she grumbled.

"Sweets, I know you didn't get enough sleep last night," her father said gently and set his hand on her shoulder. "The memories are still running around in your head."

"What time is it?" she grumbled, still hiding her head under the pillow.

"It's just past two," her father said softly, "and I got you something to help. You'll want to analyze everything from a different perspective, trust me."

Erin turned her bloodshot, puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks towards her father who smiled gently at her. "I hope it's a pensieve," she said sleepily.

Her father's smile widened before he produced the stone bowl. "It's helped your mum and me," he said softly. "I've told everyone that you're still tired from the trip, so take your time and clear your mind."

"I still wish you would have just told me," Erin grumbled as she sat up to hug her father. "But thank you for finally telling me."

"You're welcome, Sweets," her father said with a soft chuckle. "It would have taken longer to tell you, but I certainly understand. Take your time, but everyone's hoping to see you downstairs for tea."

"I'll try," Erin said with a sigh. She watched as her father rose from the bed and with a final comforting smile, he stepped into the hall and closed the door.

"Take longer my arse," Erin grumbled while she grabbed her wand. "If you'd just learn to articulate, I'd be perfectly fine right now."

The next few hours were a painful process as she methodically recalled each memory, tapped her wand against her temple then deposited the silvery smoke into her new pensieve. More than once, new tears bubbled up and streaked down her cheeks as the memories returned to the forefront of her mind. Seeing her father cradling Tonks after she'd died, her funeral, her reaction to Hermione's final letter before he proposed, and many other memories that weren't hers.

With each touch of the wand and the subsequent tap on the edge of the stone bowl, her grief lifted. She found that the memories weren't totally removed from her mind but just the main bulk went into the pensieve. A ghostly version still lingered, reminding her that the memory was there, but it was elusive and difficult to concentrate on. She sighed in relief as the final memory was added to the pensieve and her natural emotions regained control.

A sudden anger swelled within her as she was finally able to move past her father's emotions and analyze her own.

"Why didn't they tell me right away!" she growled and put a fist into her pillow. "Didn't they think I had a right to know!"

Raging, she got out of bed and flung her suitcase open. Within a matter of minutes, she'd thrown what she wanted to wear onto the bed and after grabbing her bathrobe, set off to take a long, hot shower.

As relaxing as the water felt while it cascaded over her body, Erin couldn't shake the anger from her system. She was so angry with her parents that she'd started to cry involuntarily.

They love me, she thought over and over, and they didn't want to hurt me...

Erin growled again and finished her shower after shampooing her hair for the second time. It didn't take her long to dry off, change into her fresh clothes, and make herself presentable.

“Maybe this is how Mum felt after Dad gave her a pensieve,” she grumbled and headed downstairs. She remembered to use the handrail this time, luckily, because she’d tripped on the carpet again.

“Is everything ok?” Hermione asked worriedly as she rushed to the stairs.

“It’s fine, Mum,” Erin said in irritation. “I tripped but I was using the handrail this time.”

Hermione sighed in relief and smiled brightly at her daughter. “Are you ready for tea? There’s still a half hour before we eat.” She looked at her daughter curiously and Erin saw the quick flash of surprise in her eyes.

“Yes, I’m angry,” Erin said in a huff. “I need to think things through, I’m sure you understand since you went through the same thing with Dad.”

“O-of course,” Hermione stuttered, taken aback by the tone in Erin’s voice.

“I don’t hate you, Mum,” Erin said with an impatient sigh. “I just need to process everything from my point of view, not Dad’s.” She finished walking down the stairs and caught her mother in a hug. “I *don’t* hate you.”

Hermione hugged her back in relief and nodded softly. “Take all the time you need, Honey,” she said shakily.

“I might not be home for tea,” Erin announced as she pulled away. “I’ll try to be back, but I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

“Ok, Erin,” Hermione said softly. “Take the emergency portkey with you just in case...”

“I will, Mum,” Erin said in a less even tone than she’d been using earlier. “I’ll be back a little later.”

Without a further word, Erin pulled a broken CD from a drawer in the hall table, grabbed her cloak and walked out the front door into the

evening air. She heard children laughing from the back yard and she sighed. *Aunt Ginny and Uncle Neville are here*, she thought glumly as she started down the path that led to the apparation point.

She walked slowly, giving herself time to cool off. Erin had never been so angry in her life. Disappointed or irritated had been the most extreme she'd gotten. The grief she felt through her father's emotions had been the worst she'd ever been through as well.

"WHY DIDN'T HE JUST *TELL* ME!" she growled angrily and wiped away the tears that had sprung forward suddenly. "I didn't *need* to relive what he did! I didn't *need* to feel that kind of devastation!"

She kicked at a rock in the path and watched it tumble down a small dip in front of her.

"There aren't any drop offs on the way to the apparation point," she whispered to herself. She glanced at her surroundings and grumbled when the trees blocked her line of sight. Erin returned her gaze to the path before her and noticed a clearing not far ahead. Hesitantly, she took a step forward and then another. Before she knew it, she was standing at the edge of a wide field. A ghostly memory flashed through her mind—the visuals only—then she clearly saw the snow on the field, the many chairs, and a large plume of pink flame reaching towards the heavens.

The vision passed and Erin saw, instead, several headstones. But one in particular stood out from the rest. The grass around it seemed greener than the rest of the field.

Erin felt her feet move of their own accord then she felt the warmth of the greenhouse charm wash over her and finally, she was staring at the headstone that seemed to call to her.

**HERE
NYMPHADORA
LOVING
AND
SOON-TO-BE-MOTHER**

**LIES
TONKS
FIANCÉE**

“That’s all she got?” Erin asked incredulously. “She was so brave and kind and all she got was this!”

“I thought you might be here.”

Erin spun around with her wand at the ready, a curse at the tip of her tongue, but stopped when she saw her father step from the shadows. She put her wand away but glared at him with anger boiling behind her hazel eyes.

“She wasn’t one to capitalize on her acts of heroism, Erin,” her father said quietly as he stepped into the enchanted circle with her. “This is what she’d want to be remembered for, a loving fiancée and soon-to-be-mother.”

“Why didn’t you just TELL ME!” Erin asked angrily. “Why did you have to make me feel everything you did? See everything you did? Sure, I would have been more confused, but I didn’t *NEED* to see or feel *EVERYTHING!*”

Her father stood quietly, letting her rage against him and it only infuriated her more.

“*BLOODY ANSWER ME!*” she bellowed.

He replied with a hug, a rather tight hug that kept Erin from wriggling out of his grasp.

“*LET ME GO!*” she shrieked in irritation and anger. “Dad!” she cried, “let me go...”

He didn’t budge an inch. Even after she’d broken down in tears and finally returned his hug.

“Why did you have to *show* me?” she sobbed. “Why...”

“I wanted you to know that you were conceived of love,” he whispered. “I wanted you to know how much I loved her, how happy she made me and how it felt when she was gone.”

“You could have just TOLD me,” she said again.

"I could have," her father whispered hoarsely. "But I *needed* you to know. Words are powerful, but I couldn't put it all into words."

"Couldn't you have tried? Just a bit?" Erin asked quietly, calmed from her anger and the sudden bout of tears that hit her.

Her father finally loosened his grip on her and stepped back. "You, of all people, know just how well I can speak," he said with a wry grin. "I could have tried, but it would have taken longer and left all of us even more confused than when I started."

Erin sighed in defeat and looked to the headstone.

"Yes, that's all she wanted," her father reassured her. "And your mum is fine, just shaken up."

"How the hell do you keep doing that?" Erin asked in sheer annoyance.

"You're as readable as I am," he said quietly. "Both of your mums could read me like I was a book. Your mum can read you just the same way as she does me and I can you."

"Are my thoughts *that* obvious?" she asked in a huff.

"They are, Erin," he said softly and turned her face to look at him. "That's one of the many things that make you so special. That's one of the many things we love about you, Sweets."

She sighed but smiled slightly. "You're not so bad at expressing yourself, Dad," she whispered and hugged him for all she was worth. "Now I'm wondering why it's so hard to stay mad at you?"

"With your mother it's because I'm so adorable, with you..." he hummed for a moment, "...I think it's because you've wanted to marry me since you were three."

"That is so disgusting!" Erin said with feigned horror. "I still can't believe I was like that!"

Her father laughed. "I think most little girls are like that, I could be wrong though, your mum would have to talk to you."

"So... so she's ok? I didn't hurt her, did I?" Erin asked sheepishly.

"She was upset, but your mum knows there's a lot you have to deal with right now," he replied with a small smile. "I'm sure if you talked to her without growling and in your normal tone of voice, she'd feel better."

"I didn't want to hurt her," Erin said with a sigh. "I did tell her I didn't hate her, and I don't, it's just, you two kept this from me for so long..."

"I've been kicking myself in the arse for not telling you sooner," he admitted quietly, "but please keep in mind that we were trying to do what we thought was right. Life doesn't come with instructions and we were both trying to avoid those years for as long as we could."

"I literally know how you feel," Erin said with a slight smile as her father chuckled. "Is there anything else you're keeping from me? Am I some sort of princess or other nobility? Do I have a hidden Island or a castle?" she joked.

Her father laughed and shook his head. "Nothing else, Sweets, but I've added you to the wards so you can visit Tonks whenever you want. Whenever you're ready that is," he added when she looked up at him in surprise.

"You *warded* her portrait?" she asked incredulously.

"Your mum and I weren't ready to have so many questions asked," he said with a sigh. "Especially from Catherine, she starts and can't quite stop..." he smiled but noted that Erin wasn't and continued. "All three of us thought it best at the time, your mum, me and Tonks. She's not the normal portrait, not like the ones you've seen at Hogwarts."

"What do you mean? A portrait's a portrait, right?"

"Not this one, thanks to your mum," he said with a soft smile. "If you remember, she gave me the portrait just before you were born. Well," he continued at Erin's nod, "she had been doing research during her

spare time at Hogwarts and when classes let out for that summer, she mixed a special paint using some of Tonks' ashes."

"So her true essence was stored in the portrait's paint!" Erin said with realization.

"That's right," her father said with a proud smile. "So Tonks is essentially still here, though not physically or as a ghost."

"What does she think of all this?" Erin asked quietly. "Or you... If she's really like she was when she died—"

"It was very tough, at first," he said wearily. "Like I said earlier, I had to put her into storage. She was able to visit other paintings, however, since she was stored at Hogwarts, but she wasn't too happy about being locked away."

"I should guess not," Erin said sullenly as they turned towards the path that would lead them back to the house. "I assume she accepted everything that happened?"

"Eventually," he admitted as he pushed a loose branch out of their path. "She fumed for a few months and refused to speak to either of us, but she eventually calmed down when everything sank in. She remembered what she'd said just before she died and that's what broke her anger down. She realized that I was following her request and living a life of happiness. I do still wonder what would have happened had she lived, yes," he added after a quick glance at her face.

"But Mum might have died," Erin said quietly.

"Yes, she very well could have," her father said with a shrug. "But over the years, watching you and your brothers and sisters growing up, I've realized that I can't keep living in the past. That was another reason I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want to feel all of that again, but I couldn't keep the truth from you for much longer."

"The Ministry of Magic would have forced the issue either way," Erin finished for him. She looked up to find that they were in the apparation clearing. "Why are we here?"

“You wanted to get out, didn’t you?”

“I did, but I’m not feeling angry anymore,” Erin admitted with a shrug.

“How about the two of us hit the Three Broomsticks? Your mum saved us plates, but I think I want a bit of warmed butterbeer with tea.”

Erin smiled brightly, remembering the last time she and her father were in the Hogsmeade inn. She was in her seventh year and it was the last trip of the year before she finished school. She and her father had spent the day together after he’d gotten out of corridor patrol. McGonagall seemed to have gotten soft after she’d become headmistress, but Erin thought it was because of something else. “I’d love to, Daddy,” she said with a hug.

He smiled warmly at her and with a crack, the two appeared at the entrance to the quaint wizarding establishment. They were inside quickly and easily found a seat.

“Harry Potter, I haven’t seen you around here for close to three days now!” Madam Rosmerta said with a laugh. “I see you’ve brought your daughter this time.”

“Hi, Madam Rosmerta,” Erin said with a smile. “It’s been ages!”

“It’s only been a few months,” the older woman said with a laugh. “Let me guess, two stews and two butterbeers?”

“Do you have anything a bit stronger?” Erin asked innocently. She laughed at the surprised look on her father’s face and smiled widely. “Honestly, Dad, do you think spending the summer with Aunt Ginny would leave me alcohol free?”

Harry shook his head and smiled. “I guess not,” he admitted.

“What would you like then, Erin?” Madam Rosmerta said with a smile.

“I’ll have the house wine, please,” Erin said with a smile. “I tried ale once and it didn’t quite agree with me.”

"I also assume you'll want two stews with bread?"

Harry laughed and shook his head in amusement. "I've never changed that order, have I?"

"Nearly twenty years of the same thing, warm butterbeer, stew, and rolls," Madam Rosmerta said with a laugh. "Your father is so predictable sometimes it's scary."

Erin shook her head. "He still surprises me every day."

"If not stew then what would you like tonight?"

"I'd like to give your meatloaf a go this time," Harry said with a grin. "I've heard good things about it."

"I'll take a steak, medium rare with whatever vegetables you've got tonight," Erin said with a grin.

"Right, meatloaf, medium rare steak and potatoes," she returned with nods from both Harry and Erin. "I'll be right back with your drinks."

The two of them basked in the warm atmosphere of the common room as people swapped stories, ate their meals and spent time with one another. Several times, Erin looked up to see her father looking at a booth that she recognized as his and Tonks'.

"So, did showing me everything cause any problems between you and mum?" she asked after her second goblet of wine.

"No," he said with a slight smile. "It made me realize just how much I love her, but having to relive everything brought back quite a bit I didn't think I'd ever feel again."

"If there's anything like this for Andrew, Colin, Leenie, or Cath, I suggest you let them know now, and tell them don't show them," Erin said warningly.

Her father grinned and shook his head. "No, the circumstances for them weren't the same," he said with a sigh. "But they don't know about everything that happened either."

“You *WILL* tell them, won’t you?” Erin asked evenly. “They have a right to know just as much as I did. I’m their *half*-sister after all—”

“You are no such thing!” Harry said quickly in his ‘you-will-listen-to-me-because-I’m-your-father’ voice. “You are not their half-sister, your mum carried you for seven months, shared her blood with you, and gave birth to you just like the others! The circumstances were different, but you’re every bit as much their sister as you are Hermione’s daughter and don’t you forget that!”

“But Dad—” Erin said quietly.

“There are no buts about it, Erin,” he said in a softer tone. “You’re bound to me and your mum by blood, you’re bound to Tonks by blood, you’re bound to your brothers and sisters by blood, and those bonds make us all family. There are no half-brothers or sisters in this family. Your mum is really your mum, I am your dad, your grandparents are your grandparents, and so on. I know the Weasleys aren’t related by blood, but they are the only family I’ve really known until I started my own with you and your mum. Family, love, these are the ties that bind us together, Sweets, these are what keep us together.”

“And you told me you couldn’t articulate what you were feeling,” Erin said with a smirk. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too,” her father said with a wide smile. “Now why don’t we get home and let your mum know you’re ok”

Erin nodded and smiled though she still had a lot to think about. She and her father walked slowly along the path on their way back home from the apparation clearing as she mulled everything she’d been told, previously and recently, in her mind. She looked up to see her mother’s worried face peeking out the window from the sitting room and Erin smiled at her.

The door opened shortly thereafter and Hermione rushed out to gather her daughter in a great hug.

“It’s ok, Mum,” Erin said softly. “I was angry and confused, but Dad and I talked it over. I’m sorry I hurt you—”

“Don’t worry about it,” her mother said quietly as she hugged her. “I know how you feel, I just wasn’t prepared for it.”

“I’ll let you two talk,” Harry said with a soft kiss to each of their cheeks. “I think Andrew is trying out a new prank on Eileen.”

“Oh, that boy!” her mother said with a growl. “I’m going to kill Fred and George when I see them!”

Harry laughed softly and walked into the house, leaving Erin and Hermione still hugging one another.

“So you went to her grave?” her mother said knowingly.

“Dad told me you could read me like a book,” Erin said with a slight laugh.

“Unlike your father, I choose to not point that fact out,” her mother said with a sly smile. “I know you value your privacy. Did you want to talk?”

Erin nodded. “It was just so much to take in,” she said after a moment. They’d gone back into the house and taken seats in the sitting room. Luckily none of the other children were around and Erin didn’t have to deal with bedtimes like the others. “Are you ok?” she asked after a minute. “Knowing that Dad loved her so much?”

“It wasn’t easy at first,” her mother replied with a sad smile. “I was all set to tell him how I felt on Christmas when everything came out. But when they needed me to save you, I had no choice but to put that behind me and take you as my own.”

“That was so selfless of you, Mum,” Erin said softly. “I don’t know if I could even do something like that.”

“I didn’t really need to think at all,” her mother said with a warm smile. “Your dad was in pain, my friend was dying, and I wasn’t going to let you die either. It felt right that I save you and the only thing that mattered was that you live. I couldn’t do anything for Tonks, but I could do something for you. Inadvertently, Tonks gave me the ability to have children again. After what Ron did,” she shivered at the

thought, "I wouldn't have been able to have children at all, and now I have five wonderful sons and daughters."

"DADDY!" Eileen's voice echoed terrifyingly from upstairs.

"ANDREW! ENOUGH WITH THE SNAKE!" Harry bellowed in reply. "GET INTO BED AND LEAVE YOUR SISTER ALONE!"

"IT WAS JUST A JOKE!" Andrew retorted.

"AAAAH!"

"I SAID: ENOUGH. WITH. THE. SNAKE!" Harry bellowed once again.

"Alright!"

There were stomping feet heard from one room to another and the slamming of a door.

"I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU OUT OF BED AGAIN TONIGHT!" Harry yelled angrily.

"Well, mostly wonderful," her mother said with a soft chuckle.

Erin grinned in response and shook her head. "I told Dad the others need to know."

"I know," Hermione said with a sigh. "Tonks is a part of each of them and they have the right to know that as well."

"Mum, why on earth did you make that portrait of Tonks for Dad?"

"He missed her so much," her mother said with a sad look in her eyes. "I couldn't stand watching him pine for her every day, especially since I loved him so much at the time. The only thing I could think of that would make him happy was to give him Tonks."

"He didn't see her portrait again until after we'd gotten back from St. Mungo's and their reunion was the exact opposite of what I'd envisioned," she explained with a shrug. "I thought he'd be happy that she was back in his life but it only tore his heart apart even more. For a moment there, I thought he'd lock himself in his room and wither

away, but he surprised me again by putting her into storage and focusing on us.”

“Is that when you two got together?” Erin asked quietly.

“Oh, no, not yet,” her mother said with a soft smile. “Our wedding was a whirlwind event and he’d only moved on a few months prior.”

“Only a few months?” Erin asked incredulously. “I thought you two spent the most of that year dating...”

“That was a long year and quite a few things happened. We moved in together after you were born and Gramma had a field day with another baby in the house. But after eight months or so, he proposed and I said yes,” she whispered and smiled at the memory. “Things were rocky at first but he had moved on by then.”

“What happened?” Erin asked eagerly. She loved hearing about her parents’ past and still daydreamed of their wedding when she was told about it when she was younger.

“I think that’s a story for another time,” her mother said with a soft smile.

“Oh, come off it, Mum!” Erin said with an eager grin. “We have time!”

Her mother shook her head and smiled wider. “Another time, Honey, right now I’m so knackered it’s scary. There was a time I could stay up all night, but I can barely make it past midnight anymore.”

“You’re no fun,” Erin huffed, but the smile that was fighting with her pout foiled her attempt at building up the guilt factor to make her mother spill the beans.

“Since we missed the albums the other night and the rest of the family is here,” her father said with a wicked smile from the doorway. “Not to mention Ginny, Neville and the kids...”

“I thought I escaped that!” Erin grumbled.

“Not even for a minute,” he replied with a laugh. “Tomorrow night will be album night. Your Aunt Ginny suffers through it each time they visit, I’m sure you can.”

“Fine, fine,” Erin said with a sigh as her shoulders sagged.

“I’m going to get ready for bed,” her mother said with a slight laugh. “You know how your father is with those old photos; he just can’t get enough of them.”

“What about the new books?” Erin asked curiously.

Her mother and father exchanged the briefest of glances and her father nodded. “We can go through those tonight if you’d like...”

“I’m a bit curious,” Erin said with a shrug. “Should I meet you on the sofa?”

“You bet!” he replied with a wide smile. “I’ll just grab them.” He almost skipped out of the room towards his study and Erin turned to her mother.

“Do you have to go?” she asked quietly. “I’d like you to be there too...”

“Of course I’ll stay,” her mother replied with a bright smile followed by one of her patented hugs. “Why don’t we get into our pajamas and meet back here for hot cocoa?”

“That sounds great, Mum,” Erin said with a relieved smile. They passed her father in the hall and after a brief explanation both disappeared into their respective rooms. It didn’t take long for Erin to change and set her hair for the night, so after she grabbed a fleece throw from her trunk, she met her parents on the sofa in the sitting room.

They were waiting for her and smiled when she took her customary seat next to her father. Harry looked at the book in his lap for a moment before reaching for the cover with a shaking hand. He opened it slowly and the first picture displayed a group of children along with Tonks, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, and Erin’s grandparents. She immediately recognized the younger versions of

her mother and father and laughed as Tonks' nose popped to a pig's snout and back.

"That was one of her favorite ways to cheer people up," Harry said softly. "I'm sure you recognize everyone here... we were so young then and still so naïve."

"Wasn't that when you went to the Department of Mysteries?" Erin asked curiously as she watched everyone laugh.

"This was before we went to Hogwarts," he said with a smile. "We didn't go there until just after our O.W.L.s." Harry turned the page again, showing another scene. This one was a bit more depressing. Harry was forcing his smile as Hermione and Ron pecked each other on the cheeks. He turned from that, at the urging of Hermione and the page opened on another one of Harry with a forced smile holding the head boy's badge. Mrs. Weasley rushed from out of the frame and hugged him tightly, causing the three observers to laugh.

"Gramma Molly hugs like a vise," Erin said with a soft chuckle. "I thought you didn't go to the Burrow that summer..."

"I didn't, that was taken at Grimmauld Place," her father admitted. "I couldn't really handle staying with my relatives and the old Order moved me there instead. It was kept secret," he said to Hermione when she looked up with a shocked expression. "Mum and Dad knew about it but kept it quiet. A month and a half later, I took a portkey to Hogwarts."

"I thought you were at Privet Drive all this time!" Hermione huffed. "Had I known you were there, I would have forced them to take me to you!"

"I know," he said with a sigh. "But with the way things were going, I thought it was best. Had I known what Ron was doing—"

"You don't have to say it," Hermione said with a sigh. "Without a Time-Turner we can't change the past. If we had one, there would be so many paradoxes we'd be thrown in Azkaban without a second thought."

"I was wondering why you didn't use a Time-Turner to try and stop things..." Erin said thoughtfully.

"Like your mum said, the paradoxes would have been too numerous," her father said with another sigh. "It had crossed my mind but your mother's voice, explaining that terrible things can happen to wizards who play with time, kept running through my mind." He turned the page again, revealing the first picture with only Harry and Tonks in it.

"When was this taken?" Erin asked as she watched the two of them horse around. They'd smile at the camera then Tonks would push Harry out of frame, followed by Harry pushing Tonks out of frame. The two would end up laughing after several rounds and the scene would repeat.

"That was middle of seventh year," her father replied with a chuckle as he watched the antics he and his partner were engaging in. "It was before the war really got underway and Tonks still had her parents. I hadn't finished Metamorphmagus training but I had finished half of my pre-Auror training by then. We had just been partnered up and Remus took a picture to commemorate the occasion."

He turned the page again to a completely different scene. Tonks was sullen and trying desperately to turn from the camera. Harry was holding her in place along with Mad Eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Tonks eventually relented and turned towards the photographer before storming out of frame with Harry following shortly afterwards.

"We'd gotten promotions for catching the Death Eaters that killed her parents," Harry said wistfully. "They wanted a photo for the ceremony but she was still grieving. I caught an earful that day."

The next photo seemed better, though there were fake smiles on both Harry and Tonks. The backdrop, however, was the same as the previous.

"Another promotion?" Erin asked as she stroked the photo with her finger.

“Yeah,” her father said with a tight smile. “That was the day we finally put Dolohov and the Lestranges away for good. It wasn’t easy tracking them down, but we’d finally found them in an abandoned coal mine near Surrey.”

They went through each page and Harry explained the circumstances and what was happening in each photograph. They’d gotten into the time period where he and Tonks were romantically involved, whether they knew it at the time or not.

The second book had all the pictures that Harry and Tonks had taken while on their holiday to the Caribbean. Erin felt like she was watching everything all over again and her heart felt like it was going to drop like a rock into her stomach. She glanced up to see the father’s eyes brighten and her mother’s fill with tears.

“You miss her even though she’s hanging in your study?” Erin asked quietly.

They both looked at her and smiled.

“When she was Marion, I’d made my first friend since I was at Hogwarts,” her mother said softly. “I finally had a girlfriend that I could talk to and she sympathized with me so well.”

“And you know how I felt at the time,” her father said with a gentle hug. “Would you like to meet her?”

“Now?” Erin asked quickly. “Wouldn’t she be asleep?”

“She’s taken to being a night owl these days,” her father said with a soft chuckle. “But if you’re not ready—”

“Bollocks!” Erin said immediately. “I-I can meet her if it’s ok...”

“You know it is, Erin,” her mother said with a smile. “I know she’s wanted to meet you for some time...”

“O-ok,” Erin said nervously. “W-where... how do I find her?”

"Come along then," her father said with a comforting smile. He stood and offered her his hand which she took without hesitation. "Let's all go say hello. If you don't feel comfortable, just let us know and I'm sure she'll understand if you do."

Erin nodded nervously as her father and mother guided her to his study. The pink walls greeted her as always and Tonks' urn sat steadfastly in its place with lilies sticking out of the top. The bay window that faced the garden had its blinds open and a portrait that Erin had only recently seen was hanging on the opposite wall.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks said jovially from her spot on the wall. She was about to say something else when Erin stepped into the room and the pink-haired witch looked to her immediately.

"Tonks, this is Erin, Erin I'd like you to meet Tonks," Harry said with a nervous smile.

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Hi," Tonks said equally as quiet. "I wish I could hug you right now, Erin..."

"I wish I could hug you too," Erin sobbed. Harry immediately put his arm around his daughter's shoulders and squeezed gently. Hermione did the same from the other side.

"You've grown into such a beautiful woman," Tonks said with a smile, tears running down her canvas and paint face. "I saw you a few times when you were younger; I wish I could have seen you every day."

"I only just found out," Erin said quietly as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. She walked to the portrait and laid her hand on the canvas gently. "Dad used Legilimency to show me everything."

"I told him that would confuse you even more!" Tonks grumbled.

"I was, at first," Erin said softly as she looked at Tonks. "He gave me a pensieve earlier today to help work through everything. I didn't know that you'd planted the garden out back."

“That was one of my favorite days,” Tonks said with a faint smile. “Harry came home from work while I was working on it and I hoped he would like it.”

“He did, as you can see out the window,” Erin said with a smile. “My favorite is the red rosebush.”

“I loved that one too,” Tonks said with a smile. “You have his mum’s hair...”

“And I’m told I resemble you, even my eyes.”

“You do,” Tonks said with a smile. “You look so much like me when I was in school. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you, Luv, I really am sorry,” Tonks said as she started to cry. “I was so nervous when I found out I was pregnant with you, I thought Harry would leave me and I’d lose my job... But none of that mattered because I would have you in my life.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Mum,” Erin choked out. “I saw it all happen. I know you would have wanted to see me grow up. If I’d known, I would have wondered about you my entire life.”

“Hermione’s your mum now and she’s done such a wonderful job,” Tonks said with a smile from behind her tears. “And your dad, he’s a unique guy. I miss him but he needs to live...”

“She is my mum and I love her to death,” Erin said with a smile of her own. “But you’re my mum too. You made Dad so happy when you were together and he was devastated when you died.”

“I didn’t want to, believe me,” Tonks said as her voice caught on something in her throat. “I loved him more than anything in the world and it broke my heart to leave him, it really did. I almost killed Hermione when she poured me onto this canvas, but I’m glad she did. I got to see him again, see her again, and now I get to see you.”

“Did they tell you everything that happened?” Erin asked curiously as she conjured a high stool for herself.

“Most of what happened with Ron, that ruddy git!” Tonks spat angrily. “He was such a good guy and then he had to turn around on someone who was closer to him than a brother and then do all those horrible things to his girlfriend!”

“I still can’t believe that Dad forgave him,” Erin said hotly. “I was ready to throttle him and I didn’t even know who he was!”

“But that’s what makes your father so special,” Tonks said with a loving smile. “Even during the war, he kept the two of them in his heart, and even after Ron cursed me he kept him in his heart. Your father doesn’t truly know how to hate anyone. He’s had his opportunities, he’s even disliked people a great deal, but he never hated anyone.”

“That still surprises me,” Erin said with a soft smile. “How can Dad love so much after everything he went through?”

“Get used to the surprises,” Tonks said with a laugh. “When he proposed to me, I assume he showed you that too, I was so surprised I could barely understand it was happening. Here I was disguised as Hermione, thinking he was actually going to leave me because she’d woken up and realized she loved him. I was afraid I was going to have to raise you by myself—I never liked being alone—and he pops the question! I was still so afraid that he’d leave me when he found out I was pregnant and instead he was deliriously happy. I can read him like Hermione can and towards the end he could read me just as well, but I wasn’t expecting that to happen.”

“He can read me as well, so can mum, and it irritates the hell out of me,” Erin said with a laugh. “I mean, it was so hard to get away with anything when it felt like he could read my mind or something.”

“Well, he *is* a Legilimency master,” Tonks said with a grin. “He can easily tell if you’re lying, but he’s told me about how easy it is to read you. I think when I died, his powers went a little haywire and part of them migrated into you. Sort of the same way that Voldemort was connected to him. Yes, I can say his name now that he’s dead and gone.”

Erin smiled in amusement. "How does that explain Mum being able to read me as well? I guess if you consider the removal of all those memory charms and her heavy pensieve use..."

"That would do it," Tonks said with a knowing smile. "She had to use the pensieve if she wanted to stay healthy and keep you safe. She's turned out to be the best friend I've ever had, aside from Harry that is."

Erin nodded and yawned sleepily but returned her attention to Tonks. "I don't feel as strange talking to you as I thought I would," she admitted with a nervous smile.

"That's good because I think I'm nervous enough for the both of us," Tonks said with a wavering voice. "I didn't know how you'd react to me after all these years."

"I think Dad's 'explanation' helped with that," Erin said tiredly. "I got to see you as he did, so it sort of feels like I've known you for a while now."

"Don't be angry with your parents for keeping me a secret," Tonks said quietly. "Th-that was my idea."

"What?" Erin asked.

"I saw it this way: Your mum gave birth to you, if you were to find out that she wasn't the one who conceived you, you might have held some resentment against her," Tonks explained. "I didn't want that for Hermione, she's such a giving person, so full of love and compassion, that I couldn't let her lose you like that."

"But she wouldn't have—"

"You don't know that, just like I didn't know that," Tonks said quietly. "It was best you got to know her as your mum and feel loved like you were her daughter, which you are. It broke my heart to do it, but after I saw the three of you together, it had to be done. You're more mature now and can accept what happened, but when you were younger, you probably wanted to marry your Dad and be just like your mum."

Erin sighed. "Now I have some idea how Dad felt when Dumbledore kept everything from him. Did he tell you that I wanted to marry him when I was a little girl?"

"I figured you'd want to," Tonks said with a weak smile. "Not many women can resist his charms, look at me and your mum. I bet Eileen and Catherine were the same way."

"Oh, they fought about it at one point. Eileen was old enough to realize she wasn't going to marry her own father, but it didn't stop her from teasing Cath," Erin said with a sleepy laugh. "I think Cath still thinks she will, but Eileen has her eyes on some bloke in Hufflepuff."

"You look really tired, why don't you go to bed," Tonks said with a gentle smile. "You've been added to the wards and I'll be here for quite some time I imagine."

"I haven't been sleeping well since Dad showed me everything," Erin admitted. "I kept seeing you in the hospital or Ron cursing you. Not to mention all the sex you two had, I'm glad he didn't show me *everything!*"

Tonks laughed heartily. "Your father was rather—"

"Don't say it!" Erin interrupted before another word could be uttered. Tonks laughed harder at her reaction and smiled lovingly at Erin.

"Don't worry, I won't," she promised. "Now that you know, don't be a stranger, ok? I want to learn everything I can about my baby girl."

"I won't, Mum," Erin said softly and smiled at her. "Tomorrow's Dad's and my birthday but I'll try to drop in as often as I can."

"It's your birthday today, Erin," Tonks said with a wide smile and nodded toward the clock which read one minute past twelve, "happy birthday, sweetheart."

"Thanks," Erin said with half-closed eyes and a wide smile. "I'll see you tomorrow, ok?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Tonks said quietly and blew her a kiss goodnight. "I wish I could do more, but what are birthdays without surprises?"

"This has been one big surprise for me," Erin said through another yawn. "Goodnight, Mum."

She stood and ran her hand over the canvas again, Tonks tried to make contact, but Erin could feel nothing but paint and the cloth that held that paint. She smiled once more before turning around to find that her parents had already left the room.

With one final glance back to Tonks, she turned off the light and wound her way through the house to her parent's room. They both looked up when Erin knocked on the doorframe and smiled warmly at their daughter.

"Thank you both," she said quietly as she sat on the edge of their bed. "I never expected this, but now I'm glad I know."

"I'm happy you're not angry with us over this, Erin," Hermione said sadly. "I'm sorry you didn't grow up with your real—"

"How many times do I have to tell you that *you* are my real mum," Erin said in exasperation. "You were there when I was born, when I took my first steps, when I said my first words, and when I was sick. Tonks, she's my mum too, but she can't hug me when I need one or make me chicken soup when I'm sick."

"Oh, Erin, I love you so much!" her mother said with a sob and hugged her as tightly as she could.

"I love you too, Mum," Erin said quietly. "If you don't want me to call Tonks 'Mum' as well, let me know."

"Of course you can," her mother replied with a sniff. "She's your mum too, she just didn't live long enough to see you join us in this world."

"I hope you can forgive me for explaining things the way I did, Sweets," her father said with a hint of hope in his voice.

"I forgave you a long time ago for that, Dad," Erin said with a laugh. "You're lucky that you gave me that pensieve or I would have gotten really grumpy by now!"

The three of them laughed softly, not wanting to wake the others after they had finally gotten to sleep and Erin yawned once again.

"Go on to bed," Harry said with a smile, "and happy birthday, Sweets."

"Happy birthday, Daddy," Erin said with a wide smile and a hug.

"Happy birthday both of you," her mother said then snorted out a laugh when they both turned to her with pig snouts in place of their normal noses. They realized what they'd both done and Erin and her father broke down into laughter as well.

"Great minds..." Erin said.

"...think alike," her father finished with a grin.

"Get to bed, we have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow," her mother said with another hug to her daughter.

Erin smiled once more and kissed her parents goodnight before making her way to her own room. A small smile grew into a larger one as she drifted off to sleep. For the first time since she relived her father's memories, she dreamt of nothing but happy occasions.

Erin had woken up early on many days, this day, her eighteenth birthday, however, was the first time she'd been woken by the pouncing of a squealing little girl.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ERIN!" Catherine squealed in delight as her petite frame tackled her older sister.

Erin woke with a start, not expecting her youngest sister to do such a thing.

"CATH!" Erin said in a panic. "Don't DO that! You scared me half to death!"

Catherine responded with a giggle then full blown laughter as Erin deftly tickled the young girl into submission.

“OK! OK!” she squeaked but by this time Erin was laughing fully too.

“Happy birthday,” Catherine said again, gasping for air and wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“Thank you, now could you please tell me why you pounced me this morning?” Erin asked with mock sternness. “I’ve had many birthdays and you’re getting rather big for that...”

“Daddy said you’d find it funny...” Catherine said with a wide-eyed innocent look.

“Oh, he did, did he?” Erin asked in a low, calculating voice. “I assume he’s awake now?”

“He’s making breakfast—OOPS!” Catherine slammed her hands over her mouth and quickly got out of the bed. “I shouldn’t have told you that!” she shrieked then raced out of the room before more questions could be asked.

Erin didn’t have the time to formulate a plan before her father knocked on the door and smiled mischievously at her.

“Good morning, birthday girl!” he said happily. “We have an early start so I made you some breakfast.”

“And conned Cath into pouncing me awake—”

“And thought you might have some *fun* with your little sister if she pounced you awake,” he corrected with a glint in his eyes. He stepped aside and a bed tray full of Erin’s favorite breakfast foods floated in the room. With a wave of his hand, it settled across her lap.

“This smells heavenly,” she said after sniffing the air. “Thank you, Dad.”

“You’re welcome, Sweets, and happy birthday,” he said with a bright smile. “We have our appointment in three hours.”

"I know, Dad," Erin said with a grimace and a roll of her eyes. "Honestly, you'd think I couldn't remember my name sometimes."

"I'm going to talk to your mother about that little habit," he said with a laugh.

"DAAADDDYYY!"

"I'm going to kill Andrew," he grumbled but smiled lovingly at Erin. "Enjoy your breakfast—"

"GET IT AWAY FROM ME!"

"ANDREW! WHAT DID I SAY ABOUT THAT SNAKE!" her father bellowed into the hall. He smiled at Erin apologetically and closed the door behind him.

"BUT, DAD—"

"YOU KNOW HOW SHE HATES SNAKES!" he bellowed again. "If you keep this up, you won't be going to Charlie's for the summer!"

"OK!" Andrew barked in reply.

"Now get dressed, your Aunt Ginny will be here to take you to the Burrow in an hour, no more horseplay!"

Erin shook her head in silent amusement. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out why Eileen was so afraid of snakes, but then again, Erin had a problem with rats so she never brought the question up.

Breakfast in bed was always a treat in the Potter house. It usually meant that you were able to eat what you wanted without it disappearing down the gullet of one of your brothers. Colin and Andrew were near bottomless pits and they loved to eat anything and everything that was laid before them. Still, Erin did miss them and had the strangest feeling that her parents weren't done giving her more. The thought caused her to shudder slightly and then a stronger one when the ghostly memories of her father and Tonks came to mind.

“I think I’m going to ask for memory charms to clear my head of these things,” Erin grumbled as she finished off the last bit of sausage.

With breakfast eaten, she found herself with a half hour to spare before she could take a shower and get ready for the day. With seven others in the house, bathroom access quickly dwindled to a few minutes unless you were there first. Luckily, she didn’t have to leave in half an hour like the rest so she could take her time.

Erin grabbed her pensieve from its spot on top of her chest of drawers and decided to start looking over her father’s memories before she had to get ready. After swirling the silver mist and peering into the smoke, she found herself standing in Diagon Alley that fateful Christmas Eve.

Her mother seemed to have not changed a bit from then. Her wandwork as flawless as she’d come to know it while she grew up. Erin watched as she deflected curses left and right, and easily dodged the Avada Kedavra curses when they were sent her way.

Her father ran up to her mother after he’d taken out a few of the dark wizards. People fell unconscious or dead further up the alley and Erin followed as he met up with Tonks.

She really did look horrible with the looming attack of morning sickness, but the bravery and determination in her face gave Erin a sense of pride. Even pregnant, the woman was still more than a match for those who were attacking her.

“Sis, what are you doing?”

Erin started and pulled herself from the pensieve. She looked up to see the curious smile of her brother, Colin, staring back at her.

“I was just reviewing a few memories,” she said quickly and packed the stone bowl into her trunk before locking it tight.

“Oh, well, Aunt Ginny wanted to say hi before we left,” he said suspiciously before turning to the door. “She’s in the kitchen with Mum and Dad.”

“Ok, I’m going to grab a shower before I head down, does she want to leave soon?” Erin asked nervously.

“Take your time, she said she’d wait,” Colin replied with a laugh. “Something about how you hated to be ‘unclean’ before starting the day...”

Erin rolled her eyes. “I’ll be down after I take my shower, I just don’t like looking like a slob, ok?”

“If you think you look like a slob, you should see my dorm mate,” he said with a smile. “We don’t call him ‘Stinky’ without reason. Oh, and happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Colin,” Erin said with a grin.

She felt blessed that she didn’t have to go through the same rigmarole that other women did. Erin shortened her hair so she’d have less to shampoo and dry, took her shower then dressed in her favorite muggle clothing.

“Happy birthday!” Ginny said with a wide smile. “I haven’t seen you much at all these past two weeks!”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Ginny,” Erin said with a bright smile of her own as the two women hugged each other. “I’ve had quite a bit to deal with.”

“Is Justin still on your mind?” Ginny asked concernedly. “Forget about him, he’s rubbish!”

“I have, really,” Erin said with a smile. “Mum and Dad told me about the garden and what each flower *really* means.”

Her aunt’s eyes widened in surprise at the news. “They—”

“We’re all ready to go except for Colin,” Eileen chirped from the doorway. “We can’t find him anywhere.”

“We’ll talk later,” Ginny said seriously as Andrew and Catherine joined the crowd in the kitchen.

Erin nodded and looked back to the stairs. "Last time I saw him was in his room when I took my shower."

"He's not there, Sissy," Andrew said with a shrug.

"Where is he?" Hermione said with a sigh. "COLIN! IT'S TIME TO GO!" she shouted up the stairs. "DON'T MAKE ME ACCIO YOU!"

"I'll be coming over later today," Erin said to her aunt. "Dad, Mum, and I have an appointment we need to be at later."

Ginny nodded in understanding. "Let me know how it went, Gramma and Papa might want to know as well."

"COMING MUM!" Colin's voice echoed from upstairs.

"I should get the breakfast dishes from my room before Mum goes spare," Erin said with a laugh at her mother's reaction.

"I better not find syrup in your sheets, young lady!" Hermione said sternly, but the smile on her face betrayed any real anger she might have had.

"There isn't any," Erin said with a grin and started up the stairs. Colin almost bumped into her as she rounded the corner and he looked up in surprise.

"I'm coming!" he said defensively and skirted around Erin as if she were going to hit him.

"I was coming for the dishes in my room," she said with a curious smile. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said quickly and rushed down the stairs to their mother's stern voice.

Something in his eyes caught her attention and she couldn't quite place what she saw. With a shrug, she went into her room and pulled the tray from her bed. She noticed that her trunk was slightly askew from when she last saw it and panic gripped her heart.

Forgetting about the bed tray, she rushed downstairs—hand firmly on the rail—and caught sight of a flash of light from the kitchen.

“Where’s Colin?” she asked her mother in near hysterics.

“You just missed him,” Hermione replied from the table. “They just left for the Burrow.”

“Mum, I think he looked into my pensieve!” Erin said urgently. “He knows!”

“Who knows what?” her father asked curiously as he walked in from the den.

“Harry, Erin thinks Colin looked into her pensieve,” Hermione said quickly.

Her father’s face went as white as a sheet. “Oh,” he said softly and sat down. “This accelerates things a tad bit.”

“A TAD BIT!” Erin shouted hysterically. “I ran into him in the hall and something seemed strange! It looked like he was afraid of me or something!”

“Calm down, Erin,” her mother said shakily. “We can’t do anything about it now but tell him and the others everything.”

“Don’t use Legilimency on them, Dad!” Erin said at once. “They don’t need to go through what we did!”

“I won’t,” he said quietly then looked to the clock. “We don’t have much time before we have to leave as well.” Without another word, he quickly made his way to the fireplace. “THE BURROW!” he called in clear, concise words and then knelt and stuck his head in the fireplace.

Erin watched as he thanked her grandmother for the birthday wishes then spoke quietly with Colin. A few moments later, he emerged from the fireplace with a frown on his face.

“Well?” Erin and her mother asked at the same time.

“He’s promised not to say anything and he apologizes for breaking into your trunk, Erin,” he said with a sigh. “We’re all going to have a chat this afternoon after we’re finished at the ministry.”

“Everyone?” Erin said.

“The entire family,” her father said with another sigh as he ran his fingers through his unruly hair. “It’s time everyone knew, but right now, we need to get going or we’ll be late.”

The three of them let out a collective sigh as they collected their cloaks and each took hold of a broken flashlight. The portkey activated almost immediately after Erin touched it and she found herself tumbling into her father’s arms when they landed.

“I’ll never get the bloody hang of portkey travel,” she grumbled as her mother tossed the now useless piece of rubbish into a bin marked ‘USED.’

A short, rotund fellow greeted them in short order and led the trio to a small, clean room with a rather long oak table that stood in the center. They were ushered into the only three seats on the side they were currently occupying and promptly at quarter past eleven, a tall, gangly wizard and a short, attractive witch joined them from the other side.

“Good morning to you,” the wizard said as he set a portfolio on the table and sat in one of the two chairs that were left empty. “I’m assuming we all know why we’re here?”

There was a general consensus of nods from Erin and her parents while the witch produced a sheet of parchment.

“Erin Potter, I presume?” she asked with a voice that reminded Erin of Headmistress McGonagall. Erin nodded quietly for her to continue. “There are stipulations that must be met before the will may be read and processed. Mr. Potter, is this your wife?”

“She is,” Harry said curiously. “Why must you know?”

“Is she one Hermione Granger?” the witch asked without pause.

"I was until we married," Hermione said in confusion.

"Very good," the witch said in what seemed to be a satisfied voice. "We can begin."

"What does my marriage to Hermione have to do with this?" Harry asked again.

"You will find out presently, Mr. Potter," the witch said with an impatient sigh. From the portfolio, she produced a slender disk the size of a dinner plate. With a tap of her wand, it expanded into a metallic bowl where a silvery mist was floating around the rim.

That mist began to snake into the air until a ghostly Tonks appeared before the three of them. The scene around her was instantly recognizable as St. Mungo's during Christmas Eve over eighteen years ago.

"This is my last will and Testament," Tonks said hoarsely. "I never expected it to come to this, but I, Nymphadora Tonks have passed on. Harry, Love, I'm sorry I couldn't be there to watch Erin grow up and I'm so sorry I have to leave you. I hope I can tell you how much I love you before I die and I hope that you've gotten on with your life by time you hear this.

"I hope you're there as well, Hermione. He loved you first and I hope he loves you last. You've been a wonderful friend and I can only hope that the two of you find each other at some time in the future. The doctors told me why the transfer felt so strange and I hope that I've helped you in some way. I was so jealous of you before Harry proposed, and I truly hope you can forgive me.

"What can I say to you, Erin? I don't know you but I can tell you that I love you very much. I know Hermione will make a wonderful mother and Harry a wonderful father. I wish I would have gotten to know you, but it doesn't seem that I will. I miss you already and I've only felt you growing for two months. I love you, Erin, please don't be angry with me for leaving.

"I guess I should get on with things," she said with a sigh. "There's quite a bit of money in the Tonks estate along with a castle and

several private properties and businesses. I never dealt with it or touched it but it's all yours, Erin. The barristers will have everything you need. Harry, Hermione, if you've gotten married by this time I'm very happy for you and I had a vault set aside for a wedding gift. I know Erin will be born on your birthday, Dad, and you were right, she's a girl. Please, take these as gifts from me, for not being there for any of you. I really wish I could have and know that wherever I am now, I love each of you more than anything in the world."

The mist swirled once again and disappeared into the collapsible pensieve.

"WHAT!" Erin's parents said at the same time. Her father quickly wiped at his cheeks and Erin saw her mother do the same.

"This was her last will and testament," the witch said in a business-like tone.

"But Tonks didn't have a second vault!" Harry said in surprise.

"Apparently she did, Mr. Potter," the wizard said with a bright smile. "Now, if you'll all please sign where indicated, we can discuss the transfer of the vault keys and provide you with the maps to your properties. There are many wards that will align to you, Miss Potter. If you wish to sell off any of the landholdings or other assets, please contact Gringotts for estimates and auction arrangements."

The witch waved her wand over a second and third identical disk then tapped the first one. Small, blue sparks jumped lazily between the three for a few moments then she handed one to Erin and one to Harry. "These are your copies of the will," she pulled two large envelopes from the portfolio and the signed documents were slipped inside them. "And these contain the official documents, keys, and respective deeds. If you have no further questions?"

Erin looked to her parents who were staring dumbly at their envelope. "No, I don't think we have any," she said quietly.

"Very well, a good morning to you and we're sorry for your loss," the witch said without emotion as if she had rehearsed everything she'd said that day. The two Ministry officials quickly left the room and the

door opened behind them, signaling it was time for them to leave as well.

"I don't believe she did this," her father whispered as they walked to the apparation point. "Everything should have gone to you, Sweets."

"I don't really need any of this, Dad," Erin said softly and took his hand. "You knew how she was. Would she leave you out of anything if she loved you so much?"

He looked at her and smiled softly. "No, she wouldn't have."

"Why don't we put Gringotts off for a while and go to the Burrow?" her mother said with a smile.

"Actually, I want to get this all over with, Mum," Erin said quickly. "It's better that I don't have to worry about it later."

Her mother's smile faltered for a moment but it returned just as quickly. "Then it's off to Diagon Alley for us."

They didn't talk much as they apparated to the wizarding shopping district of London and had remained wrapped in their own thoughts until they reached Gringotts. After explaining their visit to one of the goblins in the main lobby, they were soon coasting along the miles of track that lay hidden under the bank.

"Vault three hundred thirty-three," their guide said and Erin's head snapped up from her ponderings. They all climbed out of the cart and she handed the goblin her new vault key.

As the door opened, her eyes went wide. The vault was enormous, easily the same size as their family vault and no less stocked full of coins. Mounds and mounds of galleons, sickles and knuts were stacked everywhere, some of them even reaching the ceiling.

"This is too much," she whispered in awe.

"Deeds, stock reports, and other documentation are stored in the chests to your right, jewelry and family heirlooms are stored to your

left,” the goblin informed her. “Will you be making a withdrawal today?”

Erin nodded dumbly and after a moment, had a bag filled with galleons. She turned to her parents who smiled at her lovingly.

"We'll have to acquaint ourselves with the Tonks family someday," her father said as he put an arm around her shoulders. "I'm sure they've all grown lonely without anyone to visit."

“Didn’t Tonks act strange when she found out about our family castle?” Erin asked numbly as they climbed back into the cart. “She seemed surprised when she visited it that first time.”

"I kept my wealth a secret," he replied with a shrug. "I figured that if a close friend could resent that, then anybody would. Tonks didn't tell me about her family estate until a few months before she died and after we had gotten back, she changed her will so you'd get everything. I didn't know she updated it after the attack."

“I was unconscious until just before she died,” her mother said sadly. “I wish I could have said a proper goodbye, but when I finished her portrait, I was able to. It was a shock to her at first, but she accepted the fact and,” she shrugged, “you know where she is now.”

“Vault four hundred thirty-two,” the goblin interrupted.

This one was vastly smaller than the other but contained quite a large sum of money in any case. There was a wrapped present sitting on the floor with an attached card. The paper was old and yellowed, as was the card.

Harry looked at Hermione and at her nod, he opened the card.

*My dearest Love,
If you've gotten this present, you and Hermione have gotten married
and I'm so happy that you've been able to live your life. I'm not going
to fool anyone and say I'm not insanely jealous of her for living the life
I could have had, but if it's anyone, I'm happy that it was her. I asked
the courier to pick out a gift in the Muggle style and I hope that you
enjoy it in your new life.*

I'll love you forever, Harry and I'll be waiting for you. Keep living your life, my love, and look after Erin and Hermione for me.
Eternally yours,
Tonks

He handed the card to his wife and wiped away the tears that had started streaming from his eyes. "I can't believe she did this!" he said with a mixture of sadness and happiness.

"Harry," her mother whimpered before hugging him tightly.

Erin watched the two of them for a moment before they both reached for her. She hugged them both fiercely, hoping to drain off some of the sadness they were feeling.

"Why don't you open the gift, Dad?" she said with a shaky voice.

He hesitated for a moment then began to peel away the wrapping on the gift. He let out a loud laugh that caused the two women to start.

"What is it, Love?" her mother asked curiously.

Harry turned around and held up the box for his wife and daughter to see. Hermione let out a laugh as well and Erin grinned.

"She got us a blender, can you believe that?" he laughed again. The laughter became infectious—except for the goblin who seemed less than amused and more than a little impatient—and the three of them climbed back into the cart.

They stepped into the bright sunlight of early afternoon a short while later and Erin looked to her parents.

"I guess we should get to the Burrow?"

"Not until we get your birthday present," her father said with a smile.

"I've already gotten more than I need, Dad," she said with a smile. They started walking towards Flourish and Blotts when her mother laughed.

"Do you mind if I get a book or three then?" she asked with a wide grin on her face.

"I don't suppose you'd mind if I went to Quality Quidditch Supplies? It's *my* birthday too, you know..." her father said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Erin laughed as well. "There's no changing you two, is there?" The three of them laughed as her parents shook their heads. "I'll just visit Madam Malkin's then," she said through her snorts of laughter.

Erin watched her parents walk hand-in-hand up the cobblestone-lined street before they each veered to their favorite stores. She shook her head in amusement and turned to the door of her favorite store.

"OOOF!" she said as she sprawled out on the street. She looked around at the scattered robes that were lying on the ground with her.

"I'm so sorry!" she said hurriedly and scrambled to pick up the clothes. "I'm such a klutz!"

"Don't worry about it, Erin," a familiar voice that was laced with amusement said.

She looked up to the offered hand and she took it with a slight smile. "Nathan? Nathan Boot?" she asked as her smile widened.

"In the flesh," Nathan said with a smile. "I haven't seen you since we took our O.W.L.s!"

"I know," she said breathlessly as she handed him his robes. "What have you been up to?"

"Mum has me interning at the Ministry of Magic," he said with a grin. "To tell you the truth, it's supremely dull and I would have much rather gone on that trip to Russia."

"I bet Justine was relieved that you stayed in London," Erin said with a smirk, remembering her classmate's girlfriend.

"We broke up almost nine months ago," Nathan said with a sigh. "She was too controlling and jealous. I couldn't even spend time with my Mum and sisters without her being suspicious."

"Really?" Erin asked, trying to keep the sudden flip in her stomach from being too noticeable. "I just broke up with a bloke named Justin who was trying to control me as well... Maybe it has to do with the name?"

Nathan laughed heartily. "It could be... it could be. Listen, I have to get home, we've got a funeral for my grandfather tomorrow, but I'd like to keep talking. We've got a lot to catch up on."

"I'd like that," Erin said with a shy smile. "I'm sorry about your grandfather..."

"It's ok, he's been sick for quite some time and it's good to see that he's not suffering anymore," Nathan said kindly. "It's a relief for the family, actually, none of us liked to see him in pain."

Erin smiled sympathetically and set her hand on his arm without thinking about what she was doing. "I'm sure he's happy that you thought that," she said softly.

"Well, I need to go, it was great seeing you again, *Potter*," he said jokingly, reminding her of one of her rivals from Ravenclaw.

"Funny," she said with a sarcastic laugh.

"I'll owl you soon, ok? Maybe we can have lunch or tea sometime?" he said when their laughter died down.

"I'll look forward to it," she said with a smile and fought the burning in her cheeks as he turned towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"Talk to you soon, Erin," he said with a wave before disappearing around the corner.

Erin turned back to the store with a goofy grin on her face and her head caught in a dreamy daze. She began looking through the racks of robes absently when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“So, who was the young man?” her mother asked with a twinkle in her eyes. “He looked familiar.”

Erin smiled widely despite herself. “Nathan Boot,” she said dreamily.

“Oh, *the* Nathan Boot from Hufflepuff?” her mother asked with a wide grin. “The same Nathan Boot you gushed about from your third year to your fifth?”

“Mum!” Erin said in embarrassment but nodded all the same. “He said he’d like to go out to lunch or tea with me sometime...”

“That’s great, Honey,” her mother said with a tight hug. “I haven’t met him but he seemed like a lovely young man.”

“He was a great friend in school, until Justine came along,” Erin said with a sigh. “But they broke up a while ago, something about her jealousy and need to control him...”

“It must have been in the water,” her mother said with a sigh. “Well, we know you aren’t like that and with any indication, he’s not like that either.”

“He’s really kind and sweet, Mum,” Erin gushed, “and I can’t get over how blue his eyes are, I couldn’t keep from staring at them...”

Her mother laughed and the two women looked up just as Harry stepped into the store.

“I know what you mean, Erin,” she said dreamily as her father slipped an arm around both of their shoulders.

“What are we talking about?” he asked with a curious smile.

“Just girl talk, Dad,” Erin said with a grin to her mother.

He smiled brightly and looked at his watch. “Well, we should get to your grandparents’ house or Gramma will go spare on us.”

“We have that talk coming as well,” Erin reminded him. “Should we go back for Tonks’ portrait?”

"I think it would be a good idea," her mother said quietly. "She can help fill in any gaps that we can't explain..."

"Seeing as no Legilimency will be used," Erin put in quickly.

"Alright, alright!" her father said with a smirk. "I heard you the last time."

Erin gave up on choosing any new robes and the three of them made their way to the Leaky Cauldron so they could Floo to the Burrow. It didn't take long to reach the Weasley ancestral home and as soon as Erin stepped out of the Kitchen's fireplace, she was engulfed in a hug that could only belong to her grandmother.

"Erin! Happy birthday, dear!" she squealed in delight as she hugged the life from her granddaughter. "I've missed you so much!"

"I've missed you too, Gramma Molly," Erin said hoarsely. "How have you been?"

"I've been fine," she replied with a smile and a kiss to her cheek. "We have a lot of catching up to do, but I have to say hello to your Mum and Dad first."

Erin laughed as Molly Weasley hurried over to her father and caught him in her trademark strangleholds of a hug. Her attention was abruptly pulled away by two pairs of arms hugging her around the waist.

"Happy birthday, Erin!" identical girls' voices sang out in unison.

"Beth! Annie!" Erin said with a laugh and knelt to their level. "I've missed you two so much!"

"Mark is hiding in the sitting room," Annie said with a giggle.

"His face went all red when he heard your voice!" Beth said with a laugh.

Erin laughed silently. "Now it's not good to tattle," she said in her best grownup voice. "He'll come say hi when he's ready."

"Mark /oooooves you, Erin," Beth said loudly.

"BETH!" a boy's voice shrieked from the other room.

The twin redheaded girls broke down in giggles and Erin shook her head with amusement. "You should stop teasing him, you two," she said with a grin.

"You better listen to her," Neville said sternly. "How many times have your Mum and I talked to you about that!"

"But Daddy!" they cried at the same time.

"No buts about it, young ladies, go apologize to your brother," he commanded as Erin stood to give him a hug. The twins grumbled and stalked off to the sitting room where their brother could be heard growling at them.

"It's good to see you again, Uncle Neville," Erin said with a laugh and a hug.

"It's only been two weeks, Erin," he said with a smile. "But we miss you terribly. Happy birthday," he said with a kiss to her cheek.

"Thanks," she said with a smile. "I hope I can visit again, but just visiting isn't going to be the same."

"It sure won't," another man's voice said from behind her.

"Chris!" Erin squealed and in a flash had her older cousin in a tight hug. "I didn't think you'd be here!"

"Alison got her vacation a bit early, Happy birthday, squirt!" he said with a laugh then picked her up and spun her around.

Erin laughed dizzily as he set her down again. "Where is that wife of yours?"

"She's taking care of the baby," he said with a smile. "Tiffany has become such a handful now that she's walking."

"Oh, I've just got to see her!" Erin squealed in delight.

“Not before you give me a hug,” her grandfather said with a laugh.

“PAPA!” Erin said happily.

“You’ve still got all that energy,” Mr. Weasley said with a laugh as his granddaughter hugged him tightly. “Happy birthday, pumpkin.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Erin said with a smile. “Any word on Percy yet?” she whispered low enough so only he could hear.

Her grandfather smiled widely. “He’s finally coming home with Penelope and the kids. I can’t believe he’s finally coming home...” he said wistfully. “Gramma doesn’t know yet, let’s keep this a secret, shall we?”

“Of course!” Erin said with a smile. “I just hope the others will welcome him back.”

“Your mother and father will, undoubtedly,” he said conspiratorially, “your grandmother will as well, but the others? That’s going to be a trick. Now go on and say hello to Alison, I’m sure she’s looking forward to seeing you.”

Erin smiled brightly and kissed her grandfather on the cheek. “Don’t forget the film this year, Papa,” she said with a wink and laughed at his blush.

“I won’t, now scoot and say hello,” he said with an embarrassed laugh.

Erin headed for the stairs and noticed her cousin hiding his face behind an upside down Chudley Canons book. She laughed silently to herself and headed up the stairs to her father’s old room. She found her Aunt Ginny, Chris’ wife, Alison and Tiffany on the bed. Tiffany was in the process of having her nappy changed by her mother and Ginny was smiling happily at the wriggling little girl.

“Hey,” Erin said as she stepped into the room.

“Erin!” Alison said happily. “I’d hug you, but I don’t think you want what I have on my hands all over you...”

"I can wait until you've washed up," Erin said with a laugh. "Hello, Tiffany," she said with a wide smile to the two year-old. The little girl looked at her for a moment, smiled, then went back to wriggling out of her mother's grasp.

"Really! It's not as if I'm cooking you for tea!" Alison said irritably as she finally got the new nappy in place. "There! I'll be right back," she said to Erin. "And you be good, you little monster," she said with a smile to her daughter.

Erin hugged Ginny tightly before picking up Tiffany and giving the little girl a kiss on the cheek.

"So they finally told you, did they?" her aunt asked as she sat back on the bed.

"They did, in a way," Erin said with a sigh and sat down next to her aunt. "Dad 'told' me through Legilimency—"

"He didn't!" Ginny said taken aback. "I'm going to wring his neck for doing that! Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. He got me a pensieve to help clear my head then I was so angry with him for not telling me sooner and for not telling me with words. I still feel pangs of his depression whenever I think of her," Erin added with a sigh.

"She was a wonderful person, Erin," her aunt said with a smile. "She made Harry very happy for a time and I could see it before they admitted it to themselves. It nearly destroyed him when she died. I don't know how many nights I sat up worrying for him."

"I didn't know that you two had tried dating," Erin said in amusement.

"Well, even though I loved him, I knew he'd never love me back the same way," her aunt said with a shrug. "Let's just say that after we kissed for the first time, we both knew that it wasn't meant to be. That and Hermione was extremely jealous. She wouldn't admit it, of course, since she thought he wasn't interested in her, but she was jealous."

“Well, everything turned out as it should have,” Erin said with a sigh and a smile. “Colin saw what I had in my pensieve and it scared him, I think. We’re going to tell the entire family tonight.”

“That’s going to be quite some trick,” Ginny said with a soft smile. “Colin didn’t look too well when we got here and he’s been in the top bedroom brooding all afternoon.”

“I need to talk to him,” Erin said with a sigh and handed Tiffany to her aunt.

“Now it’s time for a proper hug,” Alison said nervously from the door.

“I know you heard everything, Allie,” Erin said with a smirk. “And I’ve missed you so much!”

“I’ve missed you too, Erin,” Alison said with a sigh as they hugged tightly for a proper greeting. “You should go talk to Colin, he seemed miserable.”

“Will you let my mum know where I am?” Erin asked quietly.

“Sure,” Ginny said after laying a hand on her shoulder. “It’s good that things will be out in the open.”

Erin nodded and left the room. After two more flights of stairs, she found herself standing in front of a closed door. With a soft knock, she opened it to find her brother lying in a bed near a large window.

“Hey, Colin,” she said softly as she closed the door.

He looked at her strangely for a moment then turned towards the window.

“I’m sorry—”

“When were you going to tell me?” he asked harshly. “When were you going to tell me you weren’t really my sister?”

Erin winced and sat on the bed next to her brother. “I am your sister,” she said softly.

“Bollocks,” he growled. “Your mother isn’t the same as mine!”

“She is,” Erin said evenly. “I have the same blood running through my veins as you do! Mum carried me to term, raised me, and loved me, just like she did for you!”

“But she didn’t *conceive* you!” he spat back and shrugged her hand off his shoulder. “When were you going to tell me! Tell all of us?” he asked accusingly.

“I told Dad we needed to tell everyone soon,” Erin said quietly. “I only just found out myself.”

“Right!” he said disbelievingly, but his voice caught in the middle of the word.

“When I got home, Dad and Mum tried to tell me, but instead of using words, Dad used Legilimency on me,” Erin explained. “I’ve always wondered why I didn’t look like any of you but they always put it off! Every year I’d ask and they’d put it off! This time they couldn’t because I came of age and got her inheritance. They wanted to tell me before the Ministry brought it to my attention!

“Those memories that were in the pensieve, they were Dad’s,” Erin said as tears streamed down her cheeks. “I didn’t ask him to give them to me... I just wanted a simple explanation. Mum was afraid that I’d hate her because of what happened.”

“Do you?”

“Of course not!” Erin said incredulously. “I love Mum more than anything and she did something so selfless! She saved me, she saved Dad’s and Tonks’ hope, she helped Dad deal with Tonks’ death...”

Colin looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes. “Do you still love us?” he asked quietly.

“Colin, nothing in this world could make me not love you!” Erin cried and hugged him tightly. “You’re my brother!”

"I'm sorry I looked," he said with a stutter. "I didn't mean to but you looked so strange when you came out of it..."

"You shouldn't have broken into my trunk, Colin, but you don't have to apologize," she said quietly and pulled away. Erin wiped the tears from her cheeks and smiled softly at her brother. "Mum, Dad, Tonks and I are going to tell everyone tonight."

"She's still alive!" he asked in confusion.

"No, Mum made Dad a special portrait that has most of her memories and essence in it," Erin explained. "I talked to her last night before I went to bed."

"Oh," Colin said. "I-I'm sorry I blew up at you."

"Don't worry about it," she said with a shrug. "I figured that was the kind of reaction I would get from you guys."

"Erin, I'm sorry..."

"It's ok, Colin," Erin said with a sigh. "I had the same problems, but Dad set me straight. He said I was your sister, not your half-sister, because of the reasons I gave you earlier. Which memory did you see?"

"Mum and—Tonks was it?—talking with Dad in the hospital," he admitted guiltily. "Dad looked really bad."

"You didn't feel the emotions that I did," Erin said with a slight tinge of anger to her voice. "He could have told me or guided me through a pensieve recording but did he? No, he had to use Legilimency!"

"Ouch!"

"You're telling me," Erin said in a huff. "Don't get me wrong, I don't hate Dad, I love him to death, but he could have been more tactful. I had to watch them in the shower, kissing each other, and luckily he edited out most of the sex they had... But I also felt all the emotions, the love, anguish, anger, everything!"

"I don't envy you in the slightest," he said with a smirk.

"Ha, ha, you git!" Erin said with a grin. "So, are we ok?"

"Yeah, we're ok," Colin said with a shrug. "It's just going to take a bit to understand it all."

"You'll know everything by tonight," Erin reminded him. "Come on, we have Gramma Molly's cooking and Mum's cakes to go through. If we don't get down there fast enough, Mark and Andrew will have inhaled most of it."

Colin chuckled slightly. "Could you cast a refreshing charm on me? I would, but I'm underage."

Erin smiled and with a quick flick of her wand, both of their faces were tearstain free and their eyes were no longer red and puffy.

"Thanks," he said with a hug. "You're the best sister I've ever had."

"Thank you," she whispered quietly and hugged him tightly.

They left the room in a somewhat awkward silence and descended the stairs to the cacophony of voices below. Their Uncles Fred and George had finally arrived with Aunts Angelina and Katie. Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur were talking animatedly with their mother and Uncle Charlie was showing off his newest daughter, Amber.

Erin was feeling slightly dazed after running around to everyone and giving each a hug in turn. Her twin uncles were still pulling pranks and she narrowly avoided green hair and an elephant's trunk after she dodged their new gimmicks. She laughed at her father who had somehow not been fast enough. She assumed her mother and aunt had distracted him while the prank was set into motion.

She finally sat in a chair when a large, brown barn owl fluttered to a landing next to her and held out its leg. Erin looked at it curiously and noticed the letter was addressed to her.

“Thank you,” she said politely to the owl and gave it a treat before it left. She turned the letter over in her hands a few moments before she opened it and began to read.

Erin,

*I know we just ran into each other today, but I just couldn't get you out of my head and had to owl you as soon as I could. We didn't get enough time to talk and I really wish we could have but with the funeral and all I needed to get the robes back home to Mum and Dad. If you're up to it, would you like to go out for tea and a movie this Friday? I know you just got home and if you didn't want to, I understand. I just thought I'd ask before you had to leave again and I didn't want to back away like I did when we were in fifth year. I'm sorry if this seems too soon or too forward, I just didn't want to take the chance that you'd leave before we could get together. Looking forward to your reply,
Nathaniel*

P.S.: Tell your Dad I said happy birthday, I almost forgot that you two shared one.

Erin looked at the letter with wide eyes and a smile crept onto her face as she read it over a few more times.

That's what he wanted to talk about in Herbology? she asked herself with a slight laugh.

“Dad! Is Hedwig around?” Erin called across the noisy room.

“She should be out by the garage, Sweets,” he replied with a grin.

“Thanks!” she yelled excitedly and rushed to the door. “Oh, Nathan says happy birthday!”

He looked at her in confusion but when her mother whispered something to him he looked up with his parental face. That was enough to make Erin rush out the door and collide with a rather broad-shouldered redhead.

“I'm sorry,” she said with a groan as he helped her to her feet. Erin just realized that the entire house had gone completely quiet.

"That's fine," the man said with a slight smile. "I guess you're Erin?"

She finally looked into the face of her Uncle Percy and smiled. "Heard about my clumsiness, have you?"

He nodded and looked up just as his mother wrapped her arms around him.

"You prat! You giant prat!" she wailed into his chest.

"I'm sorry, mum, I should have been home a long time ago," Percy said quietly as he hugged her back.

The room exploded in sound once again as family members reunited with the last of the lost Weasleys. Erin smiled as she stepped back and remembered the letter in her hands. "Welcome home, Uncle Percy," she said. He smiled at her in return. "I'll be back in a minute, I have someone I need to write to."

Erin nearly ran to the garage where the family owl was resting quietly on her perch. Hedwig looked up at Erin's entrance and the old bird straightened, ready for her delivery.

Erin stroked her white feathers, still immaculate after all this time, and smiled. "Hey, old girl," she said softly. "You up for a delivery?"

Hedwig hooted and nipped at her finger gently, just as she'd always done for Harry, and Erin smiled wider.

"I'm glad, I'll be but a moment," she said quietly. Erin pulled up a stool and grabbed a piece of parchment from the stash under the counter.

Nathan,

I'd love to see you this Friday! I'm still sorry about your grandfather, I can't imagine losing mine, but I can tell you I know how much it hurts to lose someone you really love. I told Dad you said happy birthday and I think my Mum said something to him because he looked back with the old 'I want to meet him' look. He's really a softy, so I wouldn't worry too much about him. I was so surprised to receive your letter and I'm looking forward to seeing you at the end of the week. Be strong tomorrow and we'll talk

more later. I've got to go now, see you Friday!
With love,
Erin

She smiled to herself as she rolled the parchment and tied it to Hedwig's outstretched leg. "Could you deliver this to Nathan Boot, please?" she asked sweetly and Hedwig hooted in reply. With a flutter of wings, the aged white owl took to the sky.

"When are we going to meet him?" her mother asked from the door, smiling brightly at Erin's blushing cheeks.

"I don't know," Erin said truthfully. "Why don't we see where this goes before I bring him home to be tormented by Dad?"

"Good point," her mother said with a laugh. "How long did you know that Percy was going to come home today?"

"Papa told me when he visited Aunt Ginny a few months ago," Erin said with a smile. "He wanted to tell someone and I happened to be around."

"Well, I've been sent to fetch you, gifts are being handed out then we've got cake to eat," her mother said as she wrapped an arm around Erin's shoulders. "How do you feel about Nathan?"

"I feel good," Erin said with a goofy smile.

"As long as he makes you happy," her mother said with a wide smile. "As long as you're happy, that's all that matters."

"Thanks, Mum."

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" everyone shouted when Erin and her mother stepped into the kitchen. There were hugs all around and Erin hugged Percy, welcoming him back to the Weasley household properly. There were mounds of wrapping paper hurriedly being levitated into the dustbin as she and her father opened one present after another.

Fred and George had given her father a brazier, harkening back to a prank they played on him while she was in Australia. Everyone laughed as he blushed profusely and handed it to his wife.

Cake and icecream came next and Erin watched in amusement as her brothers and male cousins dove into the chocolate cake with abandon.

Mark had eventually gotten over his initial shyness and told Erin he missed her, before going red in the face again and making a swift exit. His sisters started teasing him relentlessly once again but were stopped by glares from their parents.

Erin sat back and watched as her large family laughed and joked with each other—just as they had for as long as she could remember—when her father stood and cleared his throat.

"Some of you know what happened eighteen years ago," he said in a clear voice, "and now it's time that everyone knows. But before I get into that business, I'd like to thank you all for giving Erin and I the most wonderful birthday we've had in years!"

Erin joined her father and Mother as they unveiled Tonks' portrait. There were a few sobs from Mrs. Weasley and Ginny at the sight and a cheerful 'Wotcher!' from the portrait of Tonks.

Erin's parents and Tonks told the story that Erin knew by heart and she watched her brothers and sisters intently, hoping the other three would understand.

When they finished, they were greeted by stunned silence. Parts of the story hadn't been known to anyone save Erin, her parents, and Tonks and after a few minutes, they were accosted with questions. They were all the same questions that Erin had asked the night she'd been told and she didn't take her eyes from her brothers and sisters.

Catherine was the first one to come over to her, the young girl had been crying when she heard what had happened. Her face was unreadable and she immediately hugged Erin as tightly as she could.

"You're still my sister, right?" she asked quietly.

"Of course I am, Cath," Erin said with a smile. "I've never stopped being your sister."

"I'm glad," Catherine said with a wide smile.

"Hey, Sis," Andrew said next. "Colin told me that you got it all first hand."

"Yeah, I told Dad off for doing that," she said with a smirk.

"It's a lot to take in, you know?" Eileen said quietly. "But that doesn't mean I don't love you."

"And I love you guys," Erin said with a sob and caught her in a hug. Andrew and Colin joined in on the group hug, along with a crying Catherine when their mother and father wrapped them all in a near stranglehold.

Erin looked over to the portrait of Tonks, who was smiling at the family embrace. Tears streamed down Erin's cheeks while she mouthed 'Thank you, Mum' to the teary-eyed Tonks. Tonks mouthed 'I love you' in return.

THE END?

A/N: Thank you all for joining me on such an emotional and challenging ride. I thought everyone deserved this long, final chapter before the end to this story and I hope you liked it. There were things that just happened and a few questions that were left lingering from the previous chapters that I wanted to answer. There were also some bits I wanted to put in to tie things to the sequel/prequel and, well, I got them in there :) Thanks for all the wonderful reviews and I hope you'll enjoy the following chapter that will have some deleted scenes from the story, a word from my wonderful betas and a bit more from me. I'd like to thank my beta readers: Tawny Spitfyre, Steve, Rachel A. Prongs, researchdome, Muddguts, and Truffles! You guys are the best and Steve helped me nail down the title of this story. Thank you all so very much!

Special thanks to those who left reviews and of course thanks to all the Anonymous reviewers and the readers who decided to remain quiet...

Extra - Erin's First Christmas

The snow crunched under his feet with each enormous, plodding step. His breath clung to his massive, unruly beard, forming a sort of frost around his lips and nose, each puff of warm air rising from his nostrils and mouth like smoke. With beady, black eyes, Hagrid looked towards the Burrow and a wide, white smile erupted from behind the mass of hair on his face. He hoisted his package, a huge tree, to his shoulder and resumed his march up the garden path.

"He's here!" Molly Weasley squealed in delight from her perch by the kitchen window. Her excited declaration caused a commotion in the house as everyone took to moving furniture this way and that to clear a path to the sitting room.

Mr. Weasley smiled brightly in greeting after he enlarged the doorframe to allow their widest and tallest of family friends entrance into the ancestral family home.

"Appy Christmas!" Hagrid called into the house after he'd shaken many loose pine needles from his beaver skin coat. "An I see yer got a path fer me ter follow!" With little effort, the half-giant pulled the large tree through the kitchen and with the help of a wand or three, righted the evergreen and set it into the base that would be its home for the next fortnight.

"Merry Christmas, Hagrid," Harry said with a grin as he slipped his wand into its holster. Before he could look up, his long-time friend caught him in a bear hug that would have easily cracked all his ribs if Hagrid had been serious about doing so.

"Arry! Yer lookin' good! How are the new mum 'an dad?"

"Tired," Hermione said as she stepped from the stairway to hug Hagrid in greeting. "Erin's been a handful these past few months."

“She doesn’t like to sleep without us near,” Harry explained as he rubbed his side. “As soon as we leave the room, she’s crying again.”

“Luckily she was too tired to wake up again tonight,” Hermione said followed by a tired yawn. She smiled apologetically and took a seat, obviously very tired due to lack of sleep.

“Go and get some rest,” Harry said quietly. “We won’t start the first day until after everyone else is here.”

Hermione smiled slightly and looked at the enormous tree. It was a very good thing that the tree was so large, with all the Weasleys, Grangers, and Potters, there was little doubt the tree would be seen after all the ornaments were hanging from its branches. Her smile faded as another, deeper yawn overtook her and grudgingly, she agreed to excuse herself to take a quiet kip for a few hours.

Harry sat heavily at the kitchen table and let out a sigh.

“Something on your mind, Harry dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked as she set a cup of hot cocoa in front of her unofficially adopted son. “Things not going well with Tonks?”

“It’s still so difficult to see her,” he replied followed by another sigh. “The dreams are still so intense and then I wake up to see her watching me from the wall... It’s surreal.”

“How is she taking her condition?”

“Well,” Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose, “she’s come to terms with the fact that she’s gone, physically. She’s also accepted her expanded portrait status...”

Molly nodded as she listened. Most in the wizarding world knew that portraits were minor reflections of the people they portrayed in life. Common phrases and pieces of advice that they’d given while alive were the most likely sources of conversation from a normal wizard painting.

The difference with Tonks’ rendering was easily determined. Though paint and canvas, she was more animated and had a larger

vocabulary than any other painting Molly could recall. The younger witch's ashes had been mixed with the paint after her cremation and that allowed the majority of the deceased's personality and memories to reside on the canvas as well.

When Hermione had surprised Harry with the portrait on his birthday five months prior, it was with a stunned expression on his face that he'd left for St. Mungo's. Returning home, for the burrow was the home for all of Molly's children—official or not, two weeks later with both Erin and Hermione warmed the old woman's heart. For the first time since Tonks had passed, Harry was wearing a genuine smile.

However, that's when the arguments with Tonks began. Almost daily, whenever Harry was in the same room with the portrait version of his ex-fiancée a shouting match between the two was inevitable. From the start, Harry wanted Tonks to see their daughter. She agreed at first, but after a while became despondent and depressed.

"She told me no again," Harry said. His words were as heavy as his heart felt. "She wants everyone to keep this quiet. She doesn't want Erin to know about her and doesn't want anyone to say anything about what happened."

"She's being unreasonable!" Ginny said as she walked in and overheard the conversation. "She's Erin's mother as well! Erin should know!"

"Easy, Gin," Neville said as he lifted their first born son, Christopher, higher on his hip. The four year old was fast asleep after crying for the past hour since he'd fallen down the stairs. "She may sound mad, but I think she's got Erin's best interest at heart."

Harry stood and rubbed his eyes. The constant quarreling with Tonks and attending to Erin had begun to take its toll. "I don't know if I can keep up with all of this," he admitted after a leonine yawn.

"Up to bed with you," Molly said while forcibly turning him towards the stairs. "It'll do no good for Erin if you're so knackered you can't look after her."

Harry nodded his agreement but noted the hint of happiness in her voice. It had been a long time since a baby had graced the home. Christopher was four years old now and though Molly loved her first grandson to death, the sounds babies made seemed to fill her with happiness, the same kind of happiness that Harry saw when Hermione was with Erin.

He slowly trudged up the stairs, paying little attention to the rows upon rows of photographs smiling and waving to him as he passed until he reached a certain shot taken of him during his first year at Hogwarts. He smiled wistfully at the memory, watching his eleven-year-old self flanked on both sides by Hermione and Ron. He noted that even then, Hermione was chancing covert glimpses at him and Ron's smile reawakened memories of the one person who was as close to a brother that Harry would ever have. The three of them smiled and smiled, blissfully unaware of what was going to happen to them in the next five years, of all the changes that would destroy their friendship.

With a final sigh, Harry pushed past the memories and returned his waning concentration to ascending the stairs. As quietly as the door would allow him, Harry opened it and snuck into Hermione's room. She was fast asleep in her bed as was Erin in her crib. He looked in on his five-month-old daughter and smiled lovingly at her peaceful face.

"I love you," he whispered quietly and bent to kiss her on the head. Erin yawned, stretched, and seemed to turn towards his warmth.

The most curious feeling darted through Harry's heart at the sight and he knew what he had to do. He knew Tonks was right. After stroking his daughter's cheek and fixing Hermione's blankets, Harry snuck out of the room and once again made his way to his own room down the hall.

Tonks was napping in a chair that Hermione had painted in the scene and woke when Harry entered.

"Wotcher, Love?" she asked sleepily and smiled as Harry pulled up a chair to sit next to the portrait. "Did Hagrid get here with the tree?"

Harry nodded absently, deep in thought, as he mulled over the best way to tell Tonks what he needed to say.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, concern laced in her voice when Harry didn't say anything immediately.

"I've been thinking about what you've been saying during our arguments," Harry said at last after a sigh of defeat. "Erin needs to focus on Hermione and me until she's old enough to understand what's happened."

Tonks sat in silence, hanging on every word that Harry spoke. She nodded but before she could say anything else, Harry continued.

"I'm not going to be of any use, being as tired as I've been" he said softly. "I can barely handle work, Erin, Hermione, and then our constant fighting—"

"We don't fight all the time," Tonks said quickly. "Just about not telling Erin..."

"And about how much time I spend with Hermione and how much time I spend away from you, amongst other things," he retorted. Harry didn't want to bring up Tonks' depression and certainly didn't want to say anything about her inability to hold her daughter. "And we argue nearly every night."

"I only see you when you're getting ready for bed and when you get up in the morning," she countered. "I love you, Harry, and it tears me up that I can't see you or Erin for more than a half hour each day!"

"Don't you think it tears me up inside that I can't hold you?" Harry asked hotly. "Don't you think I wish you could hold our daughter and show her how much you love her?" He stood, suddenly full of energy he didn't realize he had. "Every day I wish that you weren't dead and we were living a life together like we were supposed to!"

"It's not my fault—"

"I know it's not your fault!" Harry said angrily. "God damn it! I'm tired of fighting with you!"

"Well, you can't blame me for being upset, can you?" Tonks yelled in return. "The two people I love most are right here and I can't do a BLOODY thing about it!"

Harry slumped in his chair, his anger having depleted the remaining energy he had left, and he buried his face in his hands. "I can't take this anymore..." he whispered hoarsely.

"What can't you take?" Tonks asked, her voice shaking and ready to explode should another shouting match take place.

"I'm being worn down, Erin needs me," he replied. "I'm trying to follow your wishes, Love, God knows I'm trying... but I just can't, not like this."

Worry creased her features and Tonks cursed when she couldn't reach out to the man she loved and hold him. "Harry... Love..."

"I love you," Harry said, looking up at Tonks with tears forming in his eyes. "But I can't move on like this. There are just too many demands and I can't fulfill them all."

"I love you too, Harry," Tonks whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm still trying to get used to this... this situation."

Harry nodded. "I know." He looked away from her to the photo he had of Hermione and Erin. It was taken the day after Erin was born and Hermione still looked extremely tired. Though there hadn't been any complications during the birth, the hormone treatment she had taken to prepare herself for the baby hadn't run its full course. Her body had been under an extreme amount of strain that required a full two weeks of bed rest afterwards. But that didn't stop the wide smile that was firmly in place on her face.

He heard Tonks sigh in irritation, again. Every time he looked at that photo she grew irritated and shortly thereafter—

"There you go again," she said accusingly. "Every bloody time we start making headway, you look at that photo Erin and *her*!"

"Not again," Harry groaned and pressed his palms into his eyes, trying to force the developing migraine from his skull. "You know how much you mean to Hermione, don't you? How much Erin means to all of us, and how much Hermione means to me, right?"

"You know I do!" Tonks growled. "But do you know what it's like to see the man you love falling in love with someone else? Do you know how hard it is for me to see the two of you raising *OUR* daughter?"

"As I recall," Harry growled, "*BOTH* of us accepted her help when she said she'd carry Erin for you! *BOTH* of us agreed to let Hermione do it! She saved her! She's saving me—"

"*SAVING YOU!*" Tonks screeched. "Saving you from *what?* From *ME!*"

"I didn't say that," Harry said angrily, glaring at Tonks as he did so.

"Then what do you need saving from?" she retorted, glaring angrily at him in return. "Is it so horrible that I'm here, to talk to you?"

"*I'M LONELY!*" Harry yelled at the top of his lungs. "I can't handle this anymore!"

Erin's cries caught his attention and he sighed as he got up. "Now look what I've done!" he grumbled as he headed for the door. He ignored Tonks' protests as he stepped into the hall and cast a silencing charm on his room to stifle her yelling. With a hand to his head, he stalked down the room and attempted to compose himself before facing Hermione and his daughter.

Hermione looked nonplussed when he opened the door. She was bouncing Erin in her arms in an attempt to quiet her and glared at him as he shut the door behind him.

"What was it this time?" she hissed when he'd stepped up to the two. "It would be nice if you two came to some sort of understanding and stopped all this infernal yelling back and forth."

"I know, I know," Harry said wearily and held out his arms for Erin. Hermione looked from the crying little girl to him and hesitantly

passed her over. Almost immediately, Erin quieted and soon resumed a peaceful sleep in her father's arms. Harry cooed quietly to his daughter and set her in the crib only to hear a snuffle come from behind him. "Hermione?"

"I'm a terrible mother," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "Look how she acts around me..."

"You are not a terrible mother," Harry said, trying to reassure her.

"Of course I am!" she sobbed. "I can't quiet her down like you can... she barely touches my milk, only when she's really hungry... It feels like I'm doing this all alone and you come in and everything's fine with her! What am I doing wrong?"

Harry caught her in a hug as she began to cry harder but she pushed away.

"Hugging me won't help," she said angrily as the tears in her eyes finally streaked down her cheeks. "Erin just doesn't love me..."

"Of course she loves you, you're her mum," Harry said quietly.

"She doesn't," Hermione sobbed. "No matter how hard I try, Harry, she just refuses me!"

Harry guided her to her bed and sat her down. "It's probably because you're so exhausted," he said as he rubbed her shoulder. "The first month, everything was fine—"

"But then she started pushing me away!" Hermione interrupted. "I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can't feed Erin... She knows I'm not her real mum!"

"Don't say that," Harry said, squeezing her shoulder for emphasis. "You carried her and gave birth to her. Don't doubt that you're her mother. I think she picks up on that..."

"What am I going to do, Harry?" Hermione sobbed, finally allowing him to hold her. "I love her so much but she doesn't seem to love me in return... What can I do?"

Harry held her quietly, rubbing her back as Hermione let out her frustration through her tears. After a few minutes, she calmed to hiccups and sat back. He offered her a handkerchief, which she took, and smiled softly at her.

"You're her mother, don't forget that, don't doubt that," he said encouragingly as he wiped a stray tear from her cheek. "You're a wonderful mother and you'll continue to be."

"I wish I could believe you," she whispered hoarsely, fresh tears pooling in her eyes again.

"Shh," Harry said quietly and wiped the new tears away. "Get some sleep, you'll feel better afterwards." Harry guided her back into bed and tucked her in, the blankets snug about her chin and shoulders.

Hermione smiled wanly.

"Don't worry, get some rest, OK? You're doing wonderfully. If only all mothers loved their children as much as you do." He kissed her forehead and smiled. "Everything will turn around, now rest."

She nodded sleepily and before Harry could move away, she reached out and took his hand. "I'm sorry I've brought so much pain back to you."

"Nonsense," he admonished with a slight grin.

"I meant about Tonks," Hermione corrected him, knowing that he was thinking about her current state of mind and flip-floppy emotions. "You're having a hard time moving forward with her here. I should have left well enough alone."

Harry smiled again. "I'll manage," he said then squeezed her hand. "And you haven't brought me any pain. You brought me Erin and came back into my life, that makes me happy and it's all I need..." Harry brushed a stray hair off Hermione's face and kissed the revealed forehead tenderly. "Now get some sleep, Mum, we don't have much time until the new first day of Christmas begins."

"Can you... can you stay until I fall asleep?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Sure," Harry said with a smile. Hermione moved a bit so Harry could lie next to her and he wrapped his arm around her protectively. "I can stay until then," he said with a sleepy yawn.

She yawned in response and before either of them knew it, Molly was gently shaking them awake. "It's time for Erin's first day of Christmas," she whispered as Harry and Hermione both stretched.

"What time is it?" Hermione asked, her voice thick with sleep.

"You've been sleeping for six hours," Molly said with a grin. "It's just past eight."

Hermione's eyes shot open wide at the news. "Where's Erin? I didn't hear her crying!"

"She's sound asleep, dear," Molly said with a smile. "It seems all three of you were quite tired."

Hermione sighed in relief and looked at Harry who was smiling sleepily. "What?"

"This is the longest I've slept in the past four months," Harry said with a yawn. "I feel bloody fantastic!"

Hermione smirked at the realization and soon she and Harry were going their separate ways to freshen up.

"Where've you been?" Tonks asked quietly from her perch on the wall. "I waited and waited but you never came back."

"I had a talk with Hermione," Harry said as he shoved his shirt into the hamper and pulled on a fresh one he'd found in the full laundry basket at the end of his bed. "I fell asleep shortly after she did and Molly just woke me up."

"It's the first day of Christmas, isn't it?" she asked quietly. "Do they still do that?"

“Yeah,” Harry said after he’d finally gotten his shirt buttoned up and tucked in. “Erin will get to put the star on the tree this year, you know, she’s the youngest and all.”

“Harry, I’m sorry about our fight earlier, is Erin OK?”

“Yeah, she was scared because of the yelling and Hermione couldn’t quiet her down,” Harry said after he was finished tidying himself up. He turned to Tonks with a serious look on his face. “After we get back, we’re going to have a long talk,” he promised. “We can’t keep fighting like cats and dogs all the time.”

Tonks nodded, a hurt look on her face. “I don’t want to fight.”

“Neither do I,” Harry said sincerely. “Let’s get down to the sitting room.”

Without saying anything further, Harry lifted her portrait from the wall and the two of them met up with Hermione and Erin in the hall.

“Hello, little one,” Tonks said with a loving smile on her face. Erin looked at the portrait with a newborn’s curiosity. Her head weaved back and forth slightly due to her underdeveloped muscles and a gummy grin broke across her face. Tonks laughed softly as they continued down to the sitting room.

“Can we start now?” Chris asked impatiently after everyone had been assembled.

Arthur smiled as only a patient grandfather can and cleared his throat. “Yule tidings are upon us once again,” he said with a bright smile on his face as he looked over his extended family. “And as the song implies, today marks the first day of Christmas!”

Harry grinned as he looked over those who were in attendance. Hagrid had his own space in the back of the room, his beetle-black eyes glistening with happiness for having been invited. Hermione’s mother and father were sitting with their youngest daughter, Diana closer to the tree. George and his fiancée, Katie Bell, were arm-in-arm by the kitchen. Fred and Angelina were similarly positioned on the other side of the doorway. Remus Lupin, who seemed older than

ever, sat in a chair near the bottom of the stairs. He flashed Harry a smile and gave a small wave to Tonks. Ginny and Neville were sitting on the sofa with Chris standing impatiently between them. Bill and Fleur were sitting by the fire, their two-year-old daughter asleep in Fleur's arms. Charlie was standing by the front door, still clad in his dragon skin jacket, his wife and children were visiting her family this year. Percy was absent, as usual, having sent a letter two days prior announcing he was not able to attend. And Molly was standing next to Arthur, holding his arm as if he needed her support, which he did, but not physically.

"...This year we celebrate another new first day of Christmas with Erin Potter!" Arthur said as Harry's attention returned to the festive speech. "As is Weasley tradition, when we're all home, everyone please select an ornament for this wonderful tree!"

Everyone in the room took turns choosing ornaments from a large box or produced their own ornaments from their robes. Hermione reached into her purse and pulled out an ornament in the shape of a rocking horse picture frame. A wizarding photo of Erin was set behind the glass, the first picture taken of her after she was born. And stamped into the rocking horse's runner were words that read "Baby's First Christmas."

One by one each of those in attendance walked up to the tree and hung their ornament where they wished. Harry and Hermione each hung two, one for themselves, Erin, and Tonks, as did Molly who had hung an ornament for Percy every year despite his absence. Once they were finished, they all gathered around the tree and on Arthur's cue sang, "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree."

Gifts were opened next, oohs and ahhs floating through the air at one gift or another. Christopher seemed especially satisfied with his Quidditch board game and new stuffed animals while the adults were equally pleased with the gifts they'd each received.

Eggnog and appetizers were located at strategic places around the sitting room and kitchen, ready to be devoured before the first Christmas feast. As was tradition, every person who could eat had

seconds (Hagrid had the equivalent of fourths due to his size) and they all broke into small groups to catch up on everything that'd happened throughout the year.

Though he enjoyed himself and had plenty of time with Erin, the night did not pass quickly enough for Harry. He was anxious to talk to Tonks and when the time came, she wasn't happy.

"What do you mean you want me to stay in the sitting room!" she asked incredulously.

"I need a place where I can rest and when we're in the same room lately, we do nothing but argue," Harry replied. "Erin's slept the longest she's ever slept since she's come home and so has Hermione and I."

"Does this mean you want me out of your life then?" Tonks asked with hurt laced in her accusation and etched on her oil-based face.

"Love, when you died, you were ripped from my life," Harry said awkwardly. "Now I've got you back and it's nothing like what we had before. I understand it's difficult since you're not physically here and I understand it's frustrating. But all this arguing is stressing me to the point of sleeplessness. Because we argue, Erin isn't sleeping, and because Erin isn't sleeping, neither is Hermione." He took a deep breath and looked Tonks in the eyes. "I think it's best if we take a break from these close quarters and get some rest from one another, we both need it."

"Take a break?" Tonks asked quietly. "A-are you breaking up with me?"

Harry buried his face in his hands and shook his head in frustration. "I can't believe I'm actually having this conversation," he grumbled in irritation. "I'll always love you, Tonks, always! But I need to be healthy for Erin's sake! I need to rest and I can't do that right now!"

"But I don't want to leave you!" Tonks protested.

Harry sighed. He thought ghosts had a difficult time letting go of their pasts, but he did know where she was coming from. It was ripping

him up inside to even suggest parting again, but the constant fighting was even worse. He wanted the loving woman he fell in love with, but, he guessed a portrait wasn't the same as the original person. "OK," he said, resigning. "I'm not going to move you to the sitting room, but I need some space so I'm going to sleep downstairs."

"Harry," Tonks protested. "Don't go to sleep angry..."

"I'm not angry," he said, "just tired. I'll see you in the morning."

Without another word, he collected his pillow and blanket and left the room. He could hear Tonks' quiet sobbing from the hall and his heart broke once again. As he passed Hermione's and Erin's room, he heard his daughter cry out. On instinct, he opened the door and scooped her into his arms before she got to wailing and Erin immediately calmed back to sleep. He glanced over at Hermione, thankful that he was fast enough to keep Erin from waking her, and decided to sit in the rocking chair next to the crib.

Without thinking, he began rocking, stroking Erin's already reddening hair, and began to sing. "Toora loora loora... Toora loora li... Toora loora loora... Hush, now don't ye cry..."

He didn't notice the additional audience member nor that she was caught between smiling and crying herself. He didn't notice the silent tears as they crept down his cheeks, and started when Hermione wiped them clean.

"Don't stop singing," she whispered, smiling at him and running her thumb over his still-wet cheek. She slid her hand down his arm and took his free one as he resumed the lullaby.

"Over in Killarney, many years ago... My mother sang this song to me in tones so sweet and low... Just a simple little ditty in her good old Irish way... And I'd give the world if she could sing that song to me today..."

Hermione stifled a sob at the expression on Harry's face, her hand jetting to cover her mouth at the mixture of love and loss mixed in his expression. He finished the song and gently laid Erin in her crib after kissing her gently on the top of her head.

“Goodnight my Sweets, my Erin,” he said softly, stroking her back gently. Harry turned to Hermione who was smiling at him, a smile he hadn’t seen before. “Sorry I woke you,” he whispered.

“Harry,” Hermione sobbed and hugged him to her as tightly as she could. “I’m sorry. I wish your mum were still alive...”

“I do to, Hermione,” Harry said, returning the hug and letting himself sink into the embrace.

“Did you and Tonks fight again?” she asked after a few shaky breaths.

Harry nodded, not wanting to let go, but with tremendous effort did so. “I told her I needed space and to do that we couldn’t be in the same room so often. She didn’t take it too well.”

Hermione sniffled and sat on her bed. “I understand why,” she said quietly. “Maybe I put too much of her essence into the portrait.”

“No, it’s not what you did,” Harry said as he sat next to her. “It’s the situation. I can’t do as she asks of me in my dreams if I wake up and she’s actually there... well, not actually there.”

Hermione nodded.

“Today was the first time I’ve slept outside of the room she was in and it was the first time I’ve really gotten any rest in the past few months,” he admitted much to himself as to Hermione.

“Come on,” Hermione said quietly, “have a lie down here. I’m awake, now it’s time for you to get some rest.”

“I can’t,” Harry protested weakly. “You need your sleep as well.”

“Don’t worry,” she said as she guided him into a lying position on his side. “You need your rest, I’ll be right here.”

Harry yawned and his protests disappeared into mumbles. He felt Hermione’s arm slide over his side and before he knew it, he was asleep.

At ten the next morning, Harry woke with a start. He was disoriented for a moment before the memories of the previous night flooded back to him. He glanced over his shoulder to see Hermione's sleeping face nuzzled against his back and her arm was still in place, protectively holding him to her. There was movement in Erin's crib, but she wasn't crying. It seemed as if she was finally interested in the Muggle mobile that Hermione's parents had given them for Erin's baby shower.

With a sharp intake of air, Hermione opened her eyes and immediately squinted against the light. "What time is it?" she asked in a groggy, husky voice slick with sleep.

"Ten in the morning, Dear," Molly said from the doorway. They heard Erin giggle at the sight of her unofficial grandmother and once again, Hermione quickly shot across the room to check on Erin.

"Oooh, I'm so sorry, Love," she cooed to Erin who smiled up happily from the crib. Hermione immediately gathered her in her arms and sat in the rocking chair. She gasped when Erin immediately began suckling and she looked to Harry in surprise.

Harry kept any smart remarks to himself and instead smiled brightly at her in return. He felt better than he had in nearly a year and he noticed that Hermione seemed to be more aware; even the color had returned to her cheeks. Both of the new parents had looked pallid and drained due to lack of sleep but she looked as healthy as she ever had before.

"I can't believe it," Hermione said, still stunned. "You're eating, baby girl..."

Erin's continued suckling was her response and Hermione began to tear up.

"You have such a wonderful mum, don't you, Sweets?" Harry said as he bent over and kissed Erin's head. Suddenly realizing what was going on, he blushed furiously and, embarrassed, excused himself to go to the bathroom.

Surprised that the water wasn't ice cold, but didn't take the good fortune for granted, Harry let himself soak under the cascade of hot

water and groaned as the beads of warmth pelted his back. He dreaded going to his room for a change of clothes and toyed with the idea of wearing what he had on when he woke up. But, Molly frowned upon those who walked around the house in their pajamas all day so he steeled himself for the onslaught he was sure to receive from Tonks.

Harry crept into his room only to find that her portrait was empty. He didn't know where she went when not in frame, so he again didn't take the situation for granted and got dressed as quickly as he could. When he returned to the hall, Hermione handed his now-full daughter to him while she took her morning shower and the three of them headed downstairs.

George and Fred were the first to try and hide their smiles, followed quickly by Neville. Ginny smiled broadly at the two as did Molly and Arthur.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked as he sat down to a steaming plate of eggs and sausage. Hermione looked pointedly at Ginny as a plate of eggs and bacon was set before her.

"Nothing," Ginny said dismissively with a wave of her hand. "We're just happy that you three finally got some sleep."

Harry blushed profusely and looked to Hermione who just shrugged. "Nothing happened. We were simply tired and fell asleep." She busied herself with her plate and refused to look Harry in the eye.

Harry glanced to Molly, who was humming happily as she worked on the morning dishes, then to Arthur.

"Oh, look," the elder Weasley said from behind his freshly opened paper. "It seems Puddlemere won the match against the Cannons last night..."

"Big surprise, that," George said.

"They've not won against Puddlemere since the team was formed," Fred said.

“Nor the Harpies,” Angelina and Katie chimed in unison before looking at each other and bursting into giggles.

“Strange, those two,” Neville whispered as he refilled his glass with orange juice. “Ever since George and Katie got engaged, those two have taken on some of the twins’ eccentricities.”

Harry shook his head, bewildered with what was in the air. Sure, he and Hermione had slept in the same bed, but that didn’t mean anything. Did it? He glanced at Hermione and caught her before she could hide a shy smile behind a piece of bacon. A flash from the day Erin was born clouded his senses and he recalled how soft Hermione’s lips were when he’d kissed her that day. True, he’d surprised her, but it felt right for him to do so.

It felt right for him to kiss her last night as well and the glint in her eyes when she glanced at him unlocked what he thought was a dream. He remembered when he’d laid down and she draped her arm over him. He’d fallen asleep shortly thereafter but sometime in the middle of the night, he’d turned over and returned her hug. That had brought both of them out of their slumber enough to engage in one of the fieriest kisses he’d ever engaged in. His face went red just remembering what had happened and noticed Hermione’s cheeks mirrored his.

“I’ll be right back,” he said then hurriedly deposited his full plate in the sink, grabbed his cloak, and headed outside. Hagrid’s massive footprints remained in the snow, the trail heading into a copse of trees that lead down past the pond. Harry, however, didn’t really notice. His head was spinning at the implications of what happened. Had anyone seen? Was Hermione as confused as he was?

Half-way to the Quidditch pitch, he stopped dead in his tracks. “I didn’t dream about Tonks last night...” he said in bewilderment. Was it because he was awake and kissing Hermione? “No, no,” he mumbled, continuing absently to the pitch. He dreamed of her constantly, even if he was asleep for only a few minutes. “I didn’t dream of her the other day when we napped together,” he said with stark realization.

Harry didn't notice the snow crunching behind him, a hurried step from someone much lighter than himself. He literally jumped when Hermione set her hand on his shoulder.

"Harry?" she asked in concern as he turned toward her with a panicked look in his eyes.

"Hermione," he panted, though he hadn't been running, "you scared the hell out of me!"

"I'm sorry," she said sheepishly. "I just... I wanted to let you know that we didn't do anything other than kiss last night," she said shyly.

He couldn't remember if he'd initiated the kiss, if she had, or if it happened mutually and simultaneously. He looked into her eyes and saw a glimmer of hope and a bit of shame on her face. "Are you OK?" he asked with worry set in his features. "I didn't force you into it, did I?"

Hermione shook her head. "No," she said quietly. "I didn't feel forced at all, actually."

"Good," Harry said, numbly going through the scenarios in his mind. Was he going to lose her again for him being forward? He didn't want to lose her, she was too important to him. Realization dawned on him. He looked into her eyes again.

"Are *you* OK, Harry?" she asked as her teeth chattered. He realized that she wasn't wearing a coat so he immediately threw his cloak over her shoulders.

"Yeah," he said as she snuggled against him for warmth. "I think I finally am..."

They spent a few more minutes outside, enjoying their shared warmth and the silence that had settled over the two of them. It wasn't uncomfortable in the least, at least that's what Harry thought, and the more time they spent huddled under his cloak, the more content he became.

Without thinking, he brought his hand up to her chin and with a simple tilt of his wrist, Hermione was looking at him.

“Harry?” she asked. Her eyes went wide and she breathed sharply through her nose. For Harry leaned in and gently kissed her, fully on the lips, without hesitation. She squeaked in surprise at first but seemed to melt against him as she caught up and returned the kiss. Her arms snaked around his shoulders and his around her waist in a vain attempt to keep her from losing the strength in her legs and collapsing on the spot. As it happened, Harry’s knees gave out instead and the two found themselves lying in the snow, laughing like school children.

“My lips are that powerful?” she asked playfully as she turned in his arms to get a better look at his face. Her smile was warm and inviting, causing Harry to kiss her again.

“Very,” he said softly after they parted for the second time.

“Are you OK with this?” Hermione asked, motioning between the two of them with her hand. “With me?”

Harry smiled softly at the woman who was lying in his arms as memories flashed before his eyes. He remembered the kiss she’d given him on the cheek after the Tri-Wizard Tournament, the multitudes of hugs she’d given him since the first fateful night he faced Quirrell, and how he felt when he was about to his feelings before Ron had stepped in.

He remembered Tonks, and his smile faded. He remembered how much he loved her and how much it hurt to lose her then fear gripped his heart as he looked up at Hermione. She shook her head and placed her hand on his chest, over his heart.

“You won’t lose me,” she whispered. “I know I’m not Tonks, that I can never replace her—”

“No,” he said, wondering how she knew what he was thinking... every time. “You’re not Tonks,” he said quietly. “I loved her, I always will, but I love you too.”

Hermione's eyes went wide. "You love me?"

"I always have," he admitted. "You remember when I told you how I felt, before you left Ron?" Hermione nodded. "I still loved you, even then, even now." He looked at her, hoping that what he'd seen in her eyes was what he thought he'd seen.

"I think I'm falling in love with you as well," she said softly, a wide smile spreading across her rosy lips. "I was afraid that I'd never get this chance either."

She shivered involuntarily and Harry chuckled. "Let's get you inside where it's warmer. You'd think that two of the most powerful wizards on the planet would remember their wands when they left the house..."

Hermione laughed, "or at least remembered to cast a warming charm before they left."

Harry grinned and helped her to her feet. They brushed off the snow and started back to the Burrow.

"I wonder how Tonks is going to take this," she said, a worried look on her face.

"Not well," Harry admitted. "And I think it's time I put her into storage."

"What!" Hermione asked, bewildered. "Harry, you can't!"

"I have to," he said, a look of resolution on his face. "I need to move on, Hermione, I can't if she's still there."

"She's going to be devastated," Hermione said, her eyes on the path in front of her.

"I know." Harry sighed. "It won't be easy for either of us."

They continued down the path and through the garden. Harry looked up in time to see Ginny duck out of the window and he shook his head.

“I guess what just happened won’t remain a secret for long.” He looked down when he realized that they were holding hands. He didn’t remember when that had happened, but there they were: hand-in-hand, and despite what was coming, he felt the smile on his face.

The argument with Tonks seemed to last hours. This time, it wasn’t Harry who was taking the full brunt of the argument, but Hermione shared in it as well. Downstairs, they could hear Erin crying, her lungs were strong. But both of them suppressed their urges to bolt from the room and comfort their daughter.

“I WILL NOT GO INTO STORAGE!” Tonks bellowed for the hundredth time.

“You have to,” Harry said. He’d not raised his voice once throughout the entire ordeal and it was plain to anyone who saw him that he was holding the tears back. “You know I need to move on, Tonks, I need to live. I can’t like this, you know that.”

“But you don’t have to put me in storage, Love,” Tonks pleaded. “I can sit in an unused room in the house!”

Hermione’s heart was breaking at the scene and it was taking every ounce of willpower she had to keep from bursting into tears as well. She looked to Harry and her heart fell even lower, the look of hurt in his eyes a dagger in her heart. But she didn’t leave, she was there for him to offer her strength when his failed, to protect him when he could no longer protect himself.

“No... Harry, my love... no,” Tonks wailed as he draped a tarp over her portrait. “Don’t do this... please!”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, the words catching in his throat even as he said them. “I’ll always love you, but I have to move on.”

Tonks sobbed uncontrollably from behind the sheet. “Please, please don’t do this! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Love... Please.”

Hermione caught Harry about the shoulders—he was shaking so hard from his grief—as he lifted his wand and performed the charm to shrink the tarp around the frame. Tonks’ wails permeated the room

and Harry's sobs joined in with the anguish. Hermione was shaking as well, crying silently alongside her best friends.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered again as strings fastened themselves in place, holding the now-shrunk tarp firmly to the frame. Tonks' desperate pleas for forgiveness and declarations of love were not stifled by the thick fabric. Harry couldn't contain his grief any longer and with a swish of his wand, a silencing charm ended her protests.

Harry knew it was going to be difficult. He knew that Tonks would be devastated. He knew that there was the very real possibility that he'd go through the same thing he did when she'd died. This time, however, he was able to say something.

"Goodbye, Love," he whispered to the silent portrait. Then, his strength left him and he collapsed into Hermione's arms, sobbing like he'd never done before. She rocked him as she'd done in the hospital nearly a year ago, whispering words of encouragement, and this time, of love.

The second day of Christmas wasn't as cheerful as the first. The family sang after the ornaments were hung with care. Boxes were sent to Harry's room where Ginny, Fred, and George packed all of the photographs of Tonks and sent them to the attic. They'd later be transferred to Hogwarts where the rest of Harry's belongings as Professor Baker had also gone into storage.

The third day of Christmas was better than the previous day and each day became more and more cheerful as Hermione helped mend Harry's heart. The three of them rested more and more each day, finally achieving a normal sleeping pattern after the eleventh day. On the twelfth day of Christmas, a huge feast was prepared. Everyone was in high spirits and the full song of the Twelve Days of Christmas commenced with the topping of the tree. Hagrid assisted Erin in her attempt to place the star. The infant stared in awe at the glittery silver star that was held in front of her. With laughter and rejoice, Hagrid placed the star atop the tree for her and everyone cheered.

The festivities went late, well past the newly established bedtime that Harry, Hermione, and Erin currently enjoyed. The clock tolled twelve and Harry suddenly looked to Hermione.

“What is it?” she asked with a smile.

“It’s January sixth,” he said with a glint of enlightenment in his eyes.

“Yes it is,” Hermione said, snorting a laugh for she knew what was coming next.

“I just had an epiphany,” Harry declared with a smirk, knowing full well she had known what he was going to say.

“And what is this epiphany your daddy is talking about?” Hermione asked Erin, who smiled her gummy smile and burbled as if attempting to answer the question.

Harry leaned in and whispered in her ear, “Erin was worried about us.”

“What?” Hermione asked, taken aback by the proclamation.

Harry grinned. “She would cry whenever either of us was upset,” he explained. “When I was arguing with Tonks, when you were depressed or the two of us weren’t in the same room.”

Hermione smiled. “She’s a smart girl.”

“She takes after her mum,” Harry said, turning Hermione’s face to his. “I love you,” he said quietly.

“I love you too,” Hermione whispered before they kissed each other.

“Hey! The mistletoe’s over there!” George shouted from across the room.

“Or over there,” Fred shouted pointing to another sprig that was in a doorway.

Harry and Hermione laughed, looked at each other, then both kissed Erin on each of her cheeks.

“And we both love you,” they said in unison.

“And that’s the story of your first Christmas,” Hermione said with a smile as Erin wiped the tears from her eyes.

“It was wonderful and sad at the same time,” Harry said. He reached over and caught a tear Erin had missed then smiled when she caught his hand.

“I’m glad you told me about this,” she said with a smile. “And I’m sorry you three had to go through all of that.”

“I was upset and angry at the time, and damn near homicidal when he finally brought me out of storage,” Tonks said from her spot on the wall. “But I guess it had to be done.”

“I don’t want to go through that again,” Harry said with a smile to Tonks.

“MUMMY! DADDY! SANTA’S BEEN HERE!” Catherine squealed from the sitting room.

“OH MY GOSH! I GOT A BROOM!” Eileen squealed equally as loud.

“Looks like we’re done reminiscing for the night...” Hermione deadpanned.

“Come on, you three,” Harry said, getting to his feet, taking Tonks from the wall and catching his eldest daughter’s hand. “We have another twelve days of Christmas to celebrate!”

A/N: MERRY CHRISTMAS! I know, I know, I’ve been quiet for a LOOOOOONG time! But I hope this proves that I’m still alive and writing! I had no beta help on this, nor any proofing so please, PLEASE forgive any errors :) I wanted to get this out to you as soon as possible and spent the entire night writing this. Consider it a semi-sequel/prequel to The Ties That Bind, though, I think I’ve answered a lot of questions that the other story left open :) Hope this is enough H/Hr for you for awhile, until I can write more in my other stories! Again: MERRY CHRISTMAS! UPDATE: OK! I’ve done some fixing up of this and I declare it readable! Really ;) Off to bed for me!